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REPORT

RUSSIA–IRAN PARTNERSHIP: AN OVERVIEW AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

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Foreword

Iran has always had a special place in Russia's foreign policy. Relations between the two countries have never been simple, but even during the most dramatic moments in their history the two sides recognized the importance of maintaining bilateral dialogue and cooperation. Over the past two years, the international situation surrounding Iran has improved significantly. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear programme signed in July 2015 opens up considerable opportunities for Iran to further strengthen its role as a leading regional power. We can say that the attempts to isolate Tehran from the rest of the world completely failed. Iran is once again becoming a major economic player, an attractive market for foreign investment, and an important power in the Middle East, Asia and the whole world.

In these circumstances, Russia needs to form a systemic view of its relations with Iran, the one which reflects the strategic vision of bilateral cooperation – from trade and economic relations to regional and global partnership. At the same time, it is necessary to understand that forming a “strategic partnership” is only possible if relations between the two states are not affected by the political climate, and assuming they do not rely on external factors, no matter how significant they could be.

A systemic review of bilateral relations is required if a fundamental basis for a strategic partnership is to be found – of everything that has already been, or is being done, and of the potential opportunities that arise from changing economic, regional and global conditions. Special attention should probably be paid to existing complex issues in Russia–Iran cooperation, to areas where little success has been achieved so far, where subjective and objective obstacles to increasing the effectiveness of bilateral cooperation still exist.

One of the priorities for Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) has always been an analysis of the relations between Russia and Iran. The research project “Russia–Iran Relations on the Modern Stage” was initiated by RIAC in 2014. Its goal is to analyse in great detail complex issues in bilateral relations, search for promising areas of cooperation, deepen and strengthen expert knowledge in the two countries about one another.

In April 2014 RIAC signed a cooperation agreement with the Iran and Eurasia Studies Institute (IRAS). The agreement envisions joint research work and the development of practical recommendations for developing Russia–Iran relations in the long term. Throughout 2016, the experts at RIAC and IRAS have been working on four topic areas: general problems of forging a strategic partnership; approaches to security issues; regional cooperation in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Central Asia; and the problems and prospects of economic cooperation.

This report reflects the results of this work, provides the reader with the most comprehensive picture of Russia–Iran relations at their current stage of development, and identifies the fundamental interests, principles and areas of cooperation that could form the basis of a strategic partnership between the two states.

The key feature of this publication is that it successfully presents the opinions of both the Russian and Iranian sides.

In our opinion, the materials presented here demonstrate the common approaches of Russian and Iranian researchers to such problems as global governance and the role of the great powers, to the issues of polycentrism and national sovereignty. RIAC and IRAS experts share the opinion that the current world order is undergoing profound transformations and radical changes. While the results of this process are not clear yet, both Russia and Iran are equally interested in ensuring that their voices are heard by the international community, and the right to defend their own national interests and to have the opportunity to work towards these interests within the framework of international law is guaranteed. More than ever, Russia and Iran are interested in working together in this area, both on a bilateral basis and within regional international organizations and initiatives (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative, among others).

The experts also agree that a “strategic partnership” between Russia and Iran requires a solid foundation and real content: the current collection of papers offers a set of measures to improve trade and economic relations and develop cooperation in transport and infrastructure. It also outlines regional problems that require joint solutions from the Russian and Iranian sides. If these measures are implemented, they could become the solid foundation that would allow the two economies to become closely interconnected and help the partnership of the two countries develop in the long term.

The positions of Russia and Iran converge on a number of security issues: the expansion of NATO, the spread of terrorism, the threat of destabilization in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus, and the unresolved internal political crisis in Afghanistan. The issue of cooperation on the Syrian crisis deserves special attention. According to the experts, it was perhaps the key factor that led the two countries to work together closely for the first time in 25 years. Russia and Iran might have different opinions on the future of Syria and the Middle East as a whole; however, the sides have a clear understanding of what they do not want to see: a region in chaos, torn apart by extremists groups of varying degrees of radicalism, uncontrolled and being a hotbed of terrorism and destabilization.

We have to admit that, based on the impressive list of common views and approaches, Russia and Iran have every chance of forming a full-fledged strategic partnership. This partnership should be based on the development of solutions to regional issues, pragmatic and realistic initiatives for economic cooperation and opposition to common threats. I hope that the present report will be another step towards forming a common view in Russia and Iran of the fundamental bases for cooperation in the long term.

Igor Ivanov,
*President of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC),
Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences,
Doctor of History,*

Foreword

With a 500–hundred shared history and numerous ups and downs in between, Iranian–Russian relations have various lessons for today. To enjoy cordial ties now and in future, it is of most importance to have a positive and real image of each other and take some realities into account including close viewpoints on international affairs, common approach to many Middle East conflicts, absence of territorial disputes and multiple grounds for political, security, economic, scientific and cultural cooperation. Expressing new realities in bilateral relations by academics and elites will result in the decline of pessimistic assumptions, lifting the intellectual and operational obstacles in the way of bilateral ties.

Fortunately, important and promising developments have shaped the bilateral relations in the past several years. What makes these developments come true has been the leaders' will translated into the expansion of bilateral relations within the new international context. Numerous meetings and phone conversations between the leaders, foreign ministers, defence ministers, speakers of the Parliaments, heads of Judiciary and other high–level officials notably indicate a new chapter in bilateral relations.

In addition, regional cooperation between the two states, in particular, the fight against terrorism in Syria and consultations in regional and international forums, has gathered pace for years. Besides its attempts to reach a comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program, Russia's assistance in fulfilling the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by facilitating uranium exchange and expressing readiness to redesign Fordow facility and produce stable isotopes. Within newly–founded framework for cooperation, bilateral contacts on other global issues, namely fight against illegal drug trade, is becoming stronger.

On defense cooperation, the level of collaboration between the military and security officials has considerably increased, varying from tense consultation on shared challenges to technical–defense cooperation. After years, the S–300 missile system was delivered to Iran and successive talks on improving bilateral defense collaboration make progress. Moreover, both states have shaped a framework for intelligence, operational and strategic cooperation on fighting against terrorism and extremism in Syria. The position of Iran and Russia in the region and international community, bilateral cooperation and shared threats to both states are serious, to the extent that neither Tehran nor Moscow has any choice but to strengthen the contacts. Given political will and investing more into reciprocal trust, the bilateral contacts will definitely expand.

In economic cooperation, lifting the sanctions paves the way for development of the Iranian–Russian trade ties. Visits of several economic delegations headed by high–level officials facilitated many structural and legislative barriers between the two states. Some economic–based agreements, namely abandonment of double taxation, encouraging investment and customs cooperation, were signed between the two states. For the first time, Iranian companies were authorized to export aquatic and dairy products to Russia. Mitigating customs tariffs and Russia's

readiness to finance some industrial projects in Iran are among other significant measures taken to enhance the trade cooperation. Nevertheless, to enjoy robust economic ties, both sides should have deep and comprehensive understanding of each other's trade capacities and procedures. From my perspective, fields such as transportation, railroad in particular, oil and gas, nuclear and thermal power plants, mines, aerospace, agriculture and fishery have the potential to boost bilateral economic relations.

Besides, strengthening cultural, scientific, academic and people-to-people links is of utmost importance. Easing the visa regime, growth of tourist flow, increasing the number of flights and talks over removing the visa regime for tourist groups between Iran and Russia are good bases for cementing the bilateral ties. The establishment of High Commission of Iranian-Russian Scientific and Technological Cooperation and the launch of Iranian-Russian Great Universities Conference have paved the way for much better academic and scientific collaboration. Iranian-Russian cultural bonds have expanded and some initiatives like holding language courses, attending cultural events, publishing books, reviewing archives, producing music and movies and last but not least, exchanging the information and artifacts among the museums helps to serve the bilateral relations in the best way.

These issues are examples of vast areas Iran and Russia are working together and with existing potentials, the bilateral economic, political and security ties would reach the 'strategic level'. Besides, some other factors play a critical role. Among them is 'reciprocal trust' which is decisive to bilateral relations. During the years, past experience and lessons learnt helped us to relatively mitigate the mistrust. Right now, Moscow sees Iran as a reliable partner in various contexts and Tehran has more faith in New Russia, thus the sheer necessity of the existing bilateral relations.

I believe the relations between both states have significant strategic features and demand efforts to safeguard these features from temporary harm and outside intrusion. Given positive and promising bilateral relations in the past years, they require conceptual backing and guideline. This is the responsibility of elites and academics to assist the decision-makers. The future of Iranian-Russian relations depends on their leaders' will and the roles of the administrative bureaucracy and intellectual elites would like to take. We should look into the future and think how to expand and deepen bilateral relations in a way to mutually serve the interests of both states.

Fortunately, effective and beneficial cooperation including co-hosting conferences and joint research projects between The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies (IRAS) and Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) gives valuable ideas to improving the relationship between the two nations. This Report which is the newest IRAS-RIAC joint project is another step forward to conceptually and theoretically secure the Iranian-Russian ties. However, the dynamics of world development requires constant attention and innovative ideas.

Last but not least, I need to express my deepest gratitude to Minister Ivanov and his fantastic colleagues in the influential RIAC for all their help and support.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in IRAS for all their honest endeavor and boundless energy and all distinguished researchers and experts for their insightful and must-read articles.

Dr. Mehdi Sanaei

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Section I. Development of Iran–Russia Strategic Partnership

Topic 1. Iran–Russia Strategic Partnership at the New Stage: What Could We Propose to Each Other?

On the Term “Strategic Partnership”

The term “strategic partnership” is used widely in diplomatic practice and journalism to highlight special high–level relationships between two or more countries. However, a scientific definition for the term has yet to be developed.¹

So, what is “strategic partnership”? First, it implies a high degree of cooperation compared to regular relationships.

Below are some of the characteristic features that identify the essence of a strategic partnership:

- An absence of serious antagonistic interstate problems in bilateral relations;
- A high degree of mutual trust;
- Transparent relations, implying broad engagement in addressing both internal and international issues;
- Broad economic and political cooperation;
- Close coordination of foreign policy decision–making in all key areas;
- Resolute resistance to any opportunistic volatile influence originating from both partner countries (such as a change of leadership), and from the outside;
- A long–standing relationship, which is required in order to implement long–term political, economic, and, as a rule, military programmes.

The Russian researcher I. A. Novikov suggests a few more characteristic features of a strategic partnership:

- A regulatory framework for a partnership, where the essence of cooperation and mechanisms to implement it are legally enshrined;
- Long–standing mechanisms to implement a strategic partnership;
- The ability to respect each other’s interests, meet half–way, and support partners, even if there is no obvious benefit;
- Refrain, on a reciprocal basis, from any discriminatory and ultimatum–like activities with regard to partners;
- Share common values underlying a partner’s political system.

**Vladimir
SAZHIN,
RIAC Expert**

¹ Strategic partnership / Studbooks.net. URL: http://www.studbooks.net/8187/politologiya/strategicheskoe_partnerstvo (in Russian).

There is no doubt that before declaring a strategic partnership, it is necessary to analyse and compare the actual content of social transformation, as well as the capabilities, of a partner country; identify points and lines for convergence and, possibly, overlap, as well as differences and contradictions that require attention in the course of political and economic engagement.²

Since 2000, Russia has signed strategic cooperation documents with around 15 countries, including Algeria, Azerbaijan, China, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Laos, Mongolia, Morocco, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.³

If analysed objectively, the range of Russia's current relationships with the countries mentioned above – from good to bad – is very broad, and referring to relations with many of the above countries as “strategic partnerships” would be a gross exaggeration.

In this context, it would be inaccurate to identify good political, diplomatic or trade and economic relations at a high level – or coinciding positions on certain international issues, or sporadic harmonization of activities in some dimensions of foreign policies of any two countries – as a strategic partnership.

In politics, or even wars, countries may sometimes act as partners in the pursuit of specific goals; however, it does not mean that they are strategic partners.

The Russia–Iran Partnership: A Lack of Trust

Based on the above–mentioned characteristic features of strategic partnerships, as well as on objective analysis of the status of the Russia–Iran relationship,

² Strategic partnership // Studbooks.net.

URL: http://www.studbooks.net/8187/politologiya/strategicheskoe_partnerstvo (in Russian).

³ Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation, 05.10.2000.

URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/901783728> (in Russian).

Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 02.03.2001.

URL: http://www.mid.ru/maps/vn/-/asset_publisher/a6q3L9Hzzxu2/content/id/589248 (in Russian).

Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria,

04.04.2001. URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/901794649> (in Russian).

Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Morocco, 15.10.2002.

URL: <http://www.docs.pravo.ru/document/view/17355744/15005987> (in Russian).

Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, 01.12.2002.

URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3546> (in Russian).

Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Uzbekistan, 16.06.2004.

URL: http://www.uzbek-people.narod.ru/p_4.html (in Russian).

Declaration on Friendship and Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation,

03.07.2008. URL: <http://www.sngcom.ru/azerbaijan/legislation/declaration.html> (in Russian).

Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Spain, 03.03.2009.

URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/163> (in Russian).

Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Arab Republic of Egypt, 23.06.2009.

URL: <http://www.dokipedia.ru/document/5191408> (in Russian).

Declaration on the Promotion of Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and Mongolia, 25.08.2009.

URL: http://www.mongolia.mid.ru/90years_4.html (in Russian).

Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Ecuador, 29.10.2009.

URL: http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/k-70-letiu-pobedy/-/asset_publisher/HMNA6A99fPmT/content/id/1289377

(in Russian and Spanish).

Declaration on the Substance of the Strategic Partnership between Russia and Ukraine, 12.07.2012.

URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/1258> (in Russian).

Joint Declaration on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation

and the Republic of South Africa, 23.03.2013. URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/499014861> (in Russian).

Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia, 24.05.2013.

URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/1461> (in Russian).

which is not affected by the propaganda fervour caused by the current situation around Russia and Iran, it would be an obvious exaggeration to characterize them as “strategic.”

This can largely be attributed to a lack of trust between the two sides. Analysts point to several historical and current facts that discourage the Iranian side from putting their complete trust in the Russians.⁴ These include (without detailed breakdowns):

- The Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828), which formalized Russia’s victories over Persia in two wars and provided a legal framework for the transfer of vast territories in the South Caucasus (modern-day Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) to Russian jurisdiction;
- The Anglo–Russian Entente of 1907, which delineated spheres of influence in Persia;
- The occupation of Iran (as seen by Iran) by Soviet and British troops in 1941;
- The activities of the communist Tudeh Party of Iran sponsored by the USSR;
- The attempt by the Soviet Union to take Southern Azerbaijan (1946);
- The Soviet Union’s support for Iranian Kurds from the Republic of Mahabad (1946);
- The Afghan campaign of the Soviet Union (1979–1989);
- The Soviet position on the Iran–Iraq War (active support for Saddam Hussein) (1980–1988);
- The infamous Gore–Chernomyrdin Commission (1995), which froze military and technical cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran;
- Delays in the construction of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (1995–2011);
- Russia’s support of anti–Iran sanctions at the United Nations Security Council (2006–2010);
- The incident with S–300 surface–to–air missile systems and other military and technical cooperation contracts (2010–2015);
- The influence of the United States and the West on Moscow’s economy and politics (up until 2014);
- The unfair (according to Iran) division of the Caspian Sea;
- The incomplete convergence of views on the situation in Syria and future of that country.

Mandana Tisheyar, Doctor of Political Science, Assistant Professor at Tehran University and Vice–President of the Institute of Iran–Eurasia Studies (IRAS), had

⁴ This much is also evident from an article published on the website of the Institute for Iran–Eurasia Studies // IRAS, 04.05.2016. URL: <http://www.iras.ir/www.iras.iren/doc/interview/1190/gholamreza-shafei-iranian-pessimism-towards-russia-is-one-of-the-reasons-hindering-further-economic-cooperation>

this to say: “This historic negativity that still remains in Iranian society with regard to Russia was quite apparent during the rallies staged following the elections of 2009... Why were people clamouring against Russia? In my opinion, the problem is the historical memory of the Iranians, who see Russia and the United Kingdom tacitly interfering in any development, and who have a negative attitude to these two countries.”⁵

For Russia, it is also hard to deal with Iran. Azeri political expert Fahraddin Abozoda, who currently resides in Russia, makes an interesting observation: “on June 7, 2012, Shanghai hosted a meeting between President of Russia Vladimir Putin and then President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In the course of their meeting, the two heads of state unanimously approved a 10-item ‘roadmap’ for Iran, developed with the involvement of leading Russian experts.

“Alas, as soon as Ahmadinejad returned to Tehran, the local elites started a fight over the document, which was essentially nullified. The Russian administration had to make adjustments to its policy on Iran.”⁶

Incidentally, back in 2002, an ambitious project was developed: the “Long-Term Programme for the Development of Trade, Economic, Industrial, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran for the Period up to 2012.”⁷ The Russian government approved the project. But the Iranian leadership remained silent, which is why, in 2007, the promising project became invalid on the basis of Resolution No. 853 of the Government of the Russian Federation, dated December 12, 2007.⁸ That was an opportunity the two countries missed. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that the 2000s turned out to have “zero” positive impact on trade and economic relations between Russia and Iran, with the sole exception of the construction of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant by Russia.

The results of bilateral trade reported in the past few years also appear to be too modest for the relationship between Russia and Iran to be categorized as strategic. Iran accounted for 0.2 percent of Russia’s foreign trade in 2015, whereas Russia’s share in Iran’s foreign trade was 1.1 percent.⁹ Bilateral trade continues to fall; in 2014, it stood at \$1.68 billion (compared to the \$52 billion trade turnover between Iran and China in the same year), while in 2015, the figure dropped by 26 percent year-on-year to the exceedingly low level of \$1.24 billion.¹⁰

⁵ Dunayeva E.V., Sazhin V.I. (Eds.) *Russia–Iran Relations. Problems and Prospects*. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Center for Strategic Trend Studies, 2015. P. 20 (in Russian).

⁶ Abozoda F. *Russia–Iran: What is Preventing a Breakthrough in Bilateral Relations?* // REX news agency, October 25, 2014. URL: <http://www.iarex.ru/articles/51164.html> (in Russian).

⁷ Long-Term Program for the Development of Trade, Economic, Industrial, Scientific and Technical Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran for the Period up to 2012. URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/901823293> (in Russian).

⁸ URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/902077319> (in Russian).

⁹ *From bear to dragon* // Versia, 20.06.2016. URL: <https://www.versia.ru/iran-uxodit-ot-rossii-v-obyatiya-kitaya> (in Russian).

¹⁰ *Trade turnover between Russia and Iran for 2015* // Eksperty Rossii, 20.04.2016.

URL: <http://www.rusexporter.ru/research/country/detail/4239> (in Russian);

From bear to dragon // Versia, 20.06.2016. URL: <https://www.versia.ru/iran-uxodit-ot-rossii-v-obyatiya-kitaya> (in Russian).

Russian and Iranian Interests in the Caspian Region: An Area of Cooperation or Competition?

Over the 500 years since contacts between Russia and Persia began, the Caspian Sea, and the Volga River that flows into it, have played a pivotal role in the lives of the neighbouring states. In the past, the significance of this sea was limited to its role as a waterway, whereas now the Caspian encompasses political, diplomatic, economic and military dimensions.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were two Caspian Sea countries, namely Russia (the USSR) and Iran (Persia). Now there are more – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The “Caspian issue” emerged quite naturally, comprising legal, political, economic, military and environmental issues. The legal status of the Caspian Sea has remained the main issue for 25 years now, specifically, the question of how to divide it among the interested states.

The agreements between the Soviet Union and Iran – the “Russo–Persian Treaty of Friendship” signed on February 26, 1921,¹¹ and the “Treaty on Trade and Navigation between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Iran” (Tehran, March 25, 1940¹²) – remain in effect to this day. However, these documents do not regulate the current issues of dividing the Caspian territories, including subsurface use and environmental protection, military activities, transit rules etc. [see Background Information¹³].

In 2003, Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan signed a series of bilateral agreements to the effect that the seabed and its resources were subject to division, whereas the surface remained in common use. The three countries signed the Agreement on the division lines for adjacent areas of the Caspian Sea floor. All the controversial issues between the three states were settled.

¹¹ Treaty between the RSFSR and Persia. February 26, 1921 // Dokumenty XX veka.
URL: <http://www.doc20vek.ru/node/233> (in Russian).

¹² Treaty of Establishment, Commerce and Navigation / Elektronnyj fond.
URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/901861932> (in Russian).

¹³ Background Information. In the early 18th century, towards the end of the rule of Peter the Great, the Caspian Sea was within the borders of Russia (the Persian regions of Gilan, Mazandaran and Astarabad, on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, were parts of the Russian Empire). However, the border between Persia and Russia has changed many times since then.

Under the Treaty of Gulistan, signed after the Russo–Persian War of 1804–1813, Russia was granted the exclusive right to have a Naval base in the Caspian Sea.

The Treaty of Turkmenchay, which marked the formal end of the Russo–Persian War of 1826–1828, confirmed Russia’s exclusive right to have a Navy, while Persia lost all such rights (Article 8). The Treaty remained in effect until 1917.

On February 28, 1921, the Government of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic signed an agreement with Persia to cancel all of the treaties concluded with the Imperial Government, including the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, and recognized Persia’s right to free navigation in the Caspian Sea. The agreement contained no provisions on the division of Caspian waters.

On October 27, 1931, the USSR and Persia signed the Convention on Settlement, Trade and Navigation, which stated that only Soviet and Persian ships were entitled to operate in the Caspian Sea.

The 1935 Treaty on Settlement, Trade and Navigation between the USSR and Iran introduced the 10-mile coastal zone.

The same provision was confirmed in the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between the USSR and Iran, which was signed on March 25, 1940. It was reiterated that only Soviet and Persian ships were entitled to operate in the Caspian Sea. However, that Treaty was lacking clear provisions on the division of the Caspian Sea, which complicated border control activities.

The Soviet Union unilaterally recognized the Gazan-Kuli (Turkmenistan) – Astarachay (Azerbaijan) line as the borderline in 1935. URL <http://uchechnik-online.com/129/1407.html> (in Russian).

For more details, see Rustam Mamedov. International Legal Status of the Caspian Sea: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow (Theory And Practice). URL: <http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-09-2000/19.Mamedov.shtml> (in Russian).

However, Iran sharply disagreed with the Russia–Kazakhstan accord and recalled its special envoy on the Caspian issue in response to Russia’s arrangement with Azerbaijan. The Iranian leadership even voiced its intention to recall the country’s ambassador to Russia.¹⁴ Iran will not recognize the legitimacy of the tripartite agreements on the Caspian Sea,¹⁵ and insists that the seabed and surface should be divided into equal national sectors, i.e. 20 percent for each country (currently Iran owns approximately 13 percent).¹⁶

It is the dispute over the division of the Caspian Sea that is the main obstacle to the conclusion of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. Importantly, the Iranian administration considers the Caspian issue as a foreign policy priority; although it is Iran’s position on the division of the sea that has so far remained the main stumbling block on the way to agreements...¹⁷

The absence of a consensus between Iran, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are slowing down the development of a common document. So, we shouldn’t expect a significant breakthrough any time soon.

Nevertheless, some progress has been reported in other areas. The following documents have been signed: the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea,¹⁸ the Agreement on Security Cooperation in the Caspian Sea,¹⁹ a number of environmental and fishing documents (including the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Resources of the Caspian Sea),²⁰ and an agreement on the principles of national sovereignty of each of the countries in the coastal maritime space within the range of 15 miles plus 10 “fishing” miles.²¹

The participants in the most recent, Fourth Caspian Summit, which took place in Astrakhan in September 2014, spoke very highly of its outcomes. Some important documents were signed, including the Statement by the Presidents of the Five Caspian Countries, the Communiqué of the Fourth Caspian Summit, the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Hydrometeorology of the Caspian Sea, the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Emergency Response in the Caspian Sea, and the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Resources of the Caspian Sea.²²

¹⁴ Butayev A.M. The Caspian Sea: What is there in it for the West? URL: <http://www.caspij.net/knigi/kaspij-zachem-on-zapadu/43-kaspij-zachem-on-zapadu-4-kak-razdelit-kaspijskuyu-neft.html> (in Russian).

¹⁵ Aghai Diba B. Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea and the Positions of Iran // Payvand Iran News. 23.05.16. URL: <http://www.payvand.com/news/16/may/1110.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dunayeva E. Outcomes of the Astrakhan Summit of the Caspian States // NEO New Eastern Review. 09.10.2014. URL: <http://www.ru.journal-neo.org/2014/10/09/itogi-astrahanskogo-sammita-prikaspijskih-gosudarstv> (in Russian).

¹⁸ Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation on signing of Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea. URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/901878548> (in Russian).

¹⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Agreement on Security Cooperation in the Caspian Sea. URL: http://www.mid.ru/obycnye-vooruzhenia/-/asset_publisher/MJdOT56NKik/content/id/191434 (in Russian).

²⁰ URL: <http://www.docs.cntd.ru/document/420356911> (in Russian).

²¹ Caspian Sea countries agreed to establish sovereignty over the maritime space within 15 miles // Regnum news agency, September 29, 2014. URL: <https://www.regnum.ru/news/1852227.html> (in Russian).

²² The documents signed by the IV Caspian Summit // President of Russia official site, September 29, 2014. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4756> (in Russian).

The five Caspian countries agreed that military activity in the region was supposed to be based upon the principles of “reasonable adequacy” and the provision of equal security conditions for all of the Caspian countries.²³ Furthermore, they confirmed the previously agreed principle of the “non-involvement of armed forces that do not belong to the parties in the Caspian Sea.”²⁴

Currently, the Caspian region is to a great extent an area of Russia–Iran cooperation, including in the military sector. In the last few years, mutual visits by Russian and Iranian ships in the Caspian Sea have been organized on a regular basis. Joint Russia–Iran naval exercises are held. Large-scale manoeuvres of all of the Caspian Sea countries are scheduled to take place in the mid–September 2016 in the Russian coastal area.²⁵

The main thing that unites Moscow and Tehran in the “Caspian issue” is, first and foremost, their negative attitude to laying down pipelines at the bottom of the Caspian Sea (the Trans–Caspian Gas Pipeline), a project that is backed by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, remains undecided.²⁶ This shared attitude is easy to understand: neither Russia nor Iran wishes to be cut off from the European gas transportation project along the prospective Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–the Caspian Sea floor–Azerbaijan–Europe route.

In addition to these two issues, which are fundamental for both countries, Russia and Iran have either coinciding or close positions on a number of other issues. However, despite the declared common ground, Moscow is somewhat concerned over the growing military power of Iran in the Caspian region.²⁷ Interestingly, back in the times of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Iranian Navy in the Caspian Sea was represented by a single yacht.

Also noteworthy is the disagreement between Moscow and Tehran on the key issue of dividing the Caspian Sea (see above). However, since the agreements on dividing the Caspian were signed with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, Russia has been less concerned about Iran’s position. For its part, Tehran diplomatically avoids mentioning the differences, especially in the media, although the issue remains a “thorn” in the Russia–Iran relationship. The similar situation in Russian–Iranian relations takes place concerning Syrian crisis.

²³ Statement of the Presidents of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan // President of Russia official site, September 29, 2014. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4754> (in Russian).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Astrakhan determine the position of the international exercise “Caspian-2016” // Agentstvo novostej news agency, 05.05.2016. URL: http://www.astrakhan-24.ru/news/kaspy/k_boju_gotov_17659 (in Russian).

²⁶ “Caspian WISHES” of Moscow is unlikely to succeed until Karabachos conflict be settled // Vesti.az, October 18, 2014. URL: <http://www.vesti.az/news/222323> (in Russian).

²⁷ The Islamic Republic of Iran has three naval bases and approximately 90 ships in the Caspian Sea, including missile carriers, two Jamaran destroyers (light frigates) and Ghadir-class submarines. There are plans to deploy several helicopter carriers and up to 75 Peykaap-class boats. URL: http://www.russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=3627#top-content (in Russian). For more details, see V.I. Sazhin. The Military Capacity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moscow: Moscow University Press, 2014. 544 p. (in Russian).

Russian and Iranian Interests in Syria

Russia and Iran have similar position on the Syrian conflict, as they support the current state institutions in Syria. Apparently, President Bashar al–Assad would have been overthrown if it had been not for support from Iran and Russia. Tactically, the positions of Moscow and Tehran coincide; however, the two do not agree in terms of their strategic vision of Syria’s future. Russia wishes to see Syria as a secular state, with all confessions and ethnic groups being equal, whereas Iran gravitates towards helping Syria shape a state structure in which the Alawites (followers of Shia Islam) and other religious minorities would retain their advantage over the Sunni majority. This will enable Iran to strengthen its military and political positions in both Syria and across the Middle East by establishing a “Shia Crescent” that spreads from Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria.

These plans of Tehran can become a reality only if Bashar al–Assad – Iran’s only (at least officially) strategic ally – stays in power. As a result, the vision of the future of Syria’s incumbent president is different in Moscow and Tehran. Specifically, the Iran insists on keeping Bashar al–Assad as the head of state, whereas Russia is ready to compromise when it comes to the president on the condition that Syria keeps its statehood and forms a provisional coalition government comprising supporters of Bashar al–Assad and the Syrian opposition. For Russia, it is not a question of who will lead Syria, but of how the future president will assert and guarantee Russia’s interests.

The Russian researcher Nikolay Kozhanov writes: “neither Moscow nor Tehran have illusions about the difference of their ultimate objectives, which make both Russia and Iran struggle for the survival of Syrian state institutions. Ali Akbar Velayati [aide to Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – V.S.] made it clear: “Each country seeks to draw benefits, [however] Russia will be unable to protect its interests in the Middle East and the region on its own.”²⁸ Nevertheless, tactically, Russia and Iran conduct consultations; albeit without the establishment of a full military union.

As Kozhanov fairly notes, the Russia–Irani “marriage of convenience” enables the two countries to smooth out the bumps, but it fails to address the problem, only offering delays until the time comes when the question is put point–blank.²⁹

Therefore, even on the Syrian issue, which both Moscow and Tehran find so important, it would be an exaggeration to make use of such terms as “strategic partnership.”

Is a Strategic Partnership between and Iran Possible?

Based upon the academic definition – not the propaganda interpretation – of the term “strategic partnership,” the answer to the above question is “no.” In the words of Gholamreza Shafei, Iranian Ambassador to Russia in 1999–2005:

²⁸ Kozhanov N. A Marriage of Convenience // Russia in Global Affairs. 2016. No. 3.
URL: <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Brak-po-raschetu-18143> (in Russian).

²⁹ Ibid.

“It depends upon how you define a strategic alliance... I still believe that every nation must first consider its own national interest and their relations must be built upon these frameworks. Relations with Russia must follow the same path.”³⁰

It should be added that Russia’s attitude to Iran is the same. Russia’s interests in the Middle East are multidimensional, and focus not only on the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is currently facing a number of difficulties, both at the geostrategic level (the Iran–Shia confrontation with Sunnis), and within the framework of the region, where Iran’s military and political interests come into conflict with virtually all the countries in the region.

While asserting its interests in the Middle East, specifically in Syria, Russia has managed to maintain normal business relations with nearly all the countries in the Middle Eastern (except for Turkey), including the main adversaries of the Islamic Republic of Iran – Saudi Arabia and Israel. In this situation, a strategic alliance with Iran could considerably weaken Russia’s positions and cause a confrontation, first of all, with most of the countries in the region, and, second of all, with the global Muslim Sunni majority, which could have internal political consequences for the Russian Federation.

So what can be done?

Nematollah Izadi, Iran’s last ambassador to the USSR and first ambassador to Russia, said in one of his recent interviews: “We cannot have strategic relations. In some areas, our objectives are in conflict... However, we can have the best relations at the highest level possible.”³¹ In this connection, Mr. Izadi shared a very reasonable and timely idea: “Tehran and Moscow cannot be strategic allies, but we should have a strategy for our relations.”³²

Unfortunately, there is no strategy for the development of bilateral relations. As far as politics is concerned, as we have already mentioned, views often do not coincide even when it comes to such crucial areas as the Caspian Sea issue and the situation around Syria. There is no joint plan to address these issues, either.

Arguably, one of the few items that brings Moscow closer to Tehran politically is their opposition to the West. However, it would seem that it is not enough. The idea put forward at the conference “Development of Strategic Partnership between Russian and Iran” on November 24, 2014 by Igor Ivanov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and current President of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), is the best illustration we can give: “You cannot build bilateral relations on joint opposition to the West. We need a constructive agenda, a list of priorities that would enable us to move forward; albeit based primarily upon mutual interests.”³³

³⁰ Shafei G.: Iranian pessimism towards Russia is one of the reasons hindering further economic cooperation. IRAS, May 4, 2016. URL: <http://www.iras.ir/www.iras.iren/doc/interview/1190/gholamreza-shafei-iranian-pessimism-towards-russia-is-one-of-the-reasons-hindering-further-economic-cooperation>

³¹ Tehran and Moscow cannot create a strategic allies, but relations strategy / IRAS. 27 May 1395 (2016). URL: <http://www.iras.ir/fa/doc/interview/1256/تهران-و-مسکو-نمی-توانند-یک-استراتژی-تعاونی-ایجاد-کنند-اما-می-توانند-یک-استراتژی-تعاونی-ایجاد-کنند> (in Persian).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ivanov I. President, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). Speech at a conference on 24.11.14.

However, new shades have appeared even in the proximity of the anti–western positions of Moscow and Tehran. The post–sanctions Iran represented by the liberal and reform–backing wing of the political and business elite, as well as the majority of the population, are looking with increasing hope to the West, especially the European Union.³⁴ Moreover, the President of Iran Hassan Rouhani has said that Iran could have friendly relations with the United States, which, in the eyes of his fundamentalist opponents, is interpreted as mutiny and heresy that should be condemned and slammed.³⁵

Yet, the main thing is that Iran desperately needs enormous foreign investments and high technology.³⁶

What are Russia’s Interests in Building a Partnership with Iran? Why Does Russia Need Iran?

The Islamic Republic of Iran plays a dominant military and political role in one of the key regions of the planet – Western Asia, which comprises the Middle East, the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia. There is no need to mention that Iran is a crucial source of hydrocarbons. Iran owns 10 percent of the world’s proven reserves of oil with 158 billion barrels,³⁷ fourth behind Venezuela (298.3 billion barrels), Saudi Arabia (267 billion barrels) and Canada (172.9 billion barrels).³⁸ It also has 18.2 percent of the world’s natural gas reserves with 34 trillion cubic metres (making it the world leader, in front of second–placed Russia, which produces 32.6 trillion cubic metres).³⁹ Iran’s territory is an extremely valuable asset when it comes to the transporting oil and gas products and the overall transport capacity of the North–South and West–East routes. Moreover, with a population of 80 million and one of the world’s largest armies, Iran is objectively, beyond any external or internal political framework, the decisive factor of the Western Asian regional and global policy.

After the Iranian nuclear issue was effectively resolved on July 14, 2015 and the process of lifting the sanctions commenced, Iran became a global centre of gravity for politics and business. There is no way Russia can lose such a promising country, neither in the political, nor in the trade and economic sense.

As far as politics is concerned, the possible priority interest for Moscow is Tehran’s overall anti–western policy – both globally and regionally – albeit sometimes with purely propagandistic intentions.

³⁴ Sazhin V. Iran is back // RIAC, 01.02.2016.
URL: http://www.russiancouncil.ru/inner?id_4=7184#top-content (in Russian).

³⁵ Sazhin V.I. Khamenei – Rouhani: Different Visions of the Development of Iran. Institute of the Middle East. 26.03.2016.
URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=27853> (in Russian).

³⁶ See: URL: <http://pronedra.ru/globalpolitics/2016/05/03/ruhani-iran-sovershit-tehnologicheskij-skachok> (in Russian);
<http://www.trend.az/iran/business/2528206.html> (in Russian);
http://www.mt5.com/ru/prime_news/fullview/17212 (in Russian).

³⁷ Dollar on Forex fell below 49 rubbles // Birzhevoj lider, May 18, 2015.
URL: <http://www.profi-forex.org/forex/entry1008255852.html> (in Russian).

³⁸ Oil pact. Why Vladimir Putin will travel to Saudi Arabia // KO.ru, July 2, 2015.
URL: http://www.ko.ru/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=130715 (in Russian).

³⁹ BP put Russia into second place in the list of gas giants // YA62.ru news agency, 28.07.2015.
URL: http://www.ya62.ru/news/economy/bp_postavila_rossiyu_na_vtoroe_mesto_v_spiske_gazovykh_gigantov (in Russian).

When it comes to the bilateral business relations in commerce and economics, unfortunately, Russia's potential is limited to only a few industries, namely power engineering, including nuclear power; space exploration, including the launch of powerful satellites for practical economic purposes by Russian carriers; railway construction; the electrification and modernization of Iranian railways; and agriculture at various levels – from the government level to the level of small businesses. A promising area of cooperation is oil and gas exploration, as well as projects to improve oil recovery at old Iranian deposits using Russian technologies. Another significant dimension is military and technical cooperation. Nevertheless, business entities of the two countries do not seem especially interested in each other for both objective and subjective reasons (specified above).

Despite the increased frequency of meetings and negotiations at various levels – including at the summit level – and in various formats in 2014–2016, and despite the substantial number of agreements of intent, only a few projects are currently close to being implemented. These include the agreement on the construction of two new units at the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant by Russia,⁴⁰ an agreement on the modernization of Iran's railways,⁴¹ an agreement on the exploration of iron ore deposits,⁴² an agreement between Rosneftegazstroy and Iran's NPC International Ltd. on the establishment of a joint fertilizer-making company,⁴³ and an agreement on supplies of Russian automotive products to Iran.⁴⁴ Furthermore, certain progress has been made in the supplies of Iranian farm produce to the Russian Federation.

Russia has expressed its willingness to extend a state export loan of \$5 billion to Iran.⁴⁵ The first instalment, amounting to \$2.2 billion, will be provided to finance contracts for the construction of power plants and the electrification of railways. A total of 35 priority projects have been selected for joint cooperation – in power engineering, construction, marine terminals, railways, etc.⁴⁶ Whether these plans will ever reach the completion phase is the big question now.

There are many obstacles to the development of economic relations between Russia and Iran. First, big business and state corporations, which are obviously oriented to linking officials to big capital, clearly play an important role in the two economies. Second, the structure of Russian and Iranian exports is such that the consumer demand for each other's products is extremely low (which to some

⁴⁰ Russia will build 8 units at nuclear power plants in Iran // Neftegaz.ru, November 11, 2014. URL: <http://www.neftegaz.ru/news/view/132147-Rossiya-postroit-v-Irane-8-energoblokov-dlya-AES.-Ozhidaemaya-novost-i-priyatnaya> (in Russian).

⁴¹ Middle Urals – Iran: new level of cooperation // Novosti oblasti, 25.04.2016. URL: <http://www.gausoiac.ru/article/novosti-oblasti-11111111111111111111111111111111> (in Russian).

⁴² Russia will build eight nuclear power units in Iran // InvestFuture, November 11, 2014. URL: <http://www.investfuture.ru/news/id/48928> (in Russian).

⁴³ Trade turnover between Russia and Iran could reach in 2015 of 2-2.5 billion // Finanz.ru, 29.01.2015. URL: <http://www.finanz.ru/novosti/aktcii/ovarooborot-mezhdu-ir-i-iranom-mozhet-dostich-v-2015-godu-2-2-5-mlrd-dollarov-1000473593> (in Russian).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Putin: Russia is ready to grant to Iran an export credit in the amount of \$ 5 billion // NTV news agency, 24.11.2015. URL: <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1577018> (in Russian).

⁴⁶ Russia and Iran have initialed documents to open a credit line for \$ 2.2 billion // DILCapital.ru, February 10, 2014. URL: <http://www.oilcapital.ru/konyunktura/282014.html> (in Russian).

extent can be evidenced by the low level of commodity exchanges between the two countries). Third, even after Iran's access to the SWIFT system was restored, bank payments between Russian and Iranian contractors remain extremely complicated. Fourth, neither country has sufficient funds to fill these payments with the necessary money, be it roubles or rials. Fifth, transport costs are overstated because of the absence of a contemporary logistics infrastructure and agreements on road carriage. Sixth, Iranian small and medium-sized companies mostly cater for internal consumption or neighbouring markets, whereas big business is mostly oriented towards the West or China. Furthermore, red tape and ubiquitous corruption remain serious obstacles to business in both Iran and Russia, while very few entrepreneurs have an understanding of the peculiarities of doing business in both countries. Interestingly, Iran is the world's 119th economy in terms of the ease of doing business, according to the World Bank's annual Doing Business report. In 2015, Iran ranked 130th of 175 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (annual international corruption perception rankings, in which the least corrupt nation ranks first, whereas the most corrupt country ranks 175th).⁴⁷

What Steps Should be Taken to Ensure Long-Term Partner Relations between Russia and Iran?

A solid foundation needs to be formed – especially a legal framework – to work out a strategy for the consistent development of cooperation for the long run in all areas: politics, business, military and culture, without which there will be no stability or sustainability of the bilateral relationship. In this connection, it is necessary to prepare and approve a comprehensive document on the basis of bilateral partner (and non-strategic) relations, taking the fundamental interests of both countries into account, and with a clear understanding of what unites and separates them;

A priority dimension that should be in the focus of mutual efforts is a system of settlements and money transfer that concerns (and impedes!) the development of literally all cooperation areas, including tourism and cultural exchange;

It is necessary to form a list of projects in all fields of cooperation and focus on them while channelling efforts and assets into their implementation;⁴⁸

It is also important to ensure information support for the entire process of developing Russia–Iran relations by both the Russian and Iranian media.

Conclusions

Following the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue on July 14, 2015 and the beginning of the process to lift the sanctions, Iran became a key player in the global and regional political scene and a serious international legal entity;

Russia is interested in building solid partnership relations with Iran. Russia's objective is to establish reliable ties in the shortest time possible and for a long

⁴⁷ Trade turnover between Russia and Iran for 2015 // Eksperty Rossii, 20.04.2016.

URL: <http://www.rusexporter.ru/research/country/detail/4239> (in Russian).

⁴⁸ Anton Khlopkov is the director of the Center for Energy and Security Studies. Speech at a conference on 24.11.14.

term that would be independent of the political climate both inside the two countries and beyond them;

The possibilities for Russia to compete in the Iranian market are limited, not least of all by the current serious crisis phenomena in the Russian economy;

Along with the positive aspects of Russia–Iran cooperation, which are expressed in common or related interests, there are also negative features: post–sanctions Iran is clearly turning towards the West;

The domestic political situation in both Russia and Iran has changed, as has the external political situation around these countries. The establishment of partner relations between Russia and Iran that are based on trust and which pursue a more realistic and pragmatic policy inside the country, the region and the world, will pave the way for the comprehensive development of political, trade, economic, scientific and cultural ties with a view to establishing a security framework in the southern and eastern strategic areas;

Given the political, ideological, psychological, trade, economic and even philosophical factors that affect the bilateral relationship, it would seem appropriate to avoid using the term “strategic partnership” to define them, but identify the current status of Russia–Iran relations as a future–oriented “pragmatic partnership.”

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Introduction

In the past two and half decades, the Iranian–Russian relationships differ vastly compared with those in the 1980s and before. Post–revolutionary, post–war and post–Soviet Russia have been facing different political systems and regional/international settings. On the other hand, Imam Khomeini’s letter to Mikhail Gorbachev brought about a new window for bilateral relations. Indeed, the logicality of Iranian and Russian geopolitics and ideologies has changed and thus both states have bilaterally engaged within a new discourse. However, their new relationships during the twenty five years ago have considerably swayed by one international factor and that is ‘the West’. The quality of Tehran–Moscow ties has been dependent on their leanings towards the West in different periods of time. This fact, specifically, has been more obvious in Russian attitudes. In that regard, we could realize the bilateral relationship in two key instances: first, joint military collaboration against common threats in Afghanistan (1996–2001) and Syria (2012–2016); Second Russian affirmative votes to six United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) against the Iranian Nuclear dossier. Therefore, it is inferred that Iranian–Russian interactions bilaterally, regionally and internationally differ and it is only the regional cooperation that we could expect strategic partnership between the two states. This paper attempts to explain this argument and to this ends; bilateral, regional and international levels of cooperation will be discussed from strategic point of view.

Technology and Market

The value of economic relations between Iran and Russia reached \$3 billion from 1991 to 2000, increased to \$4 billion from 2001 to 2011, and then declined to \$1.5 billion from 2010 to 2013. Compared with relations of Iran and Russia with many other countries (e.g. their economic relations with Turkey with a value close to \$40 billion), these figure are very low. Although relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated and culminated with the Ukrainian crisis and imposition of sanctions against Russia by the European Union and the US following the beginning of the new term of Vladimir Putin’s presidency in 2012 and problems caused by the resumption of NATO expansion plan and deployment of NATO missile shield in Czech, Poland, Romania, and Turkey, these new tensions have left no impact on improvement of economic relations between Iran and Russia because of the legal structure of the sanctions regime, and the value of Russian trade turnover with Iran has still remained at the level of \$1 billion.

Cooperation between Iran and Russia on the Syria crisis since 2012, diplomacy of Iran’s new President Hassan Rouhani, activation of Iran’s diplomacy towards Russia, frequent meetings of officials and increased level of interactions, appointment of new ambassador of Iran to Moscow, and mobilization of relations between Tehran and Moscow have only managed to reduce the downward trend of trade and increase its value by \$500 million in recent years. Many infrastructures have been established in this regard in the past three years, such as Comprehensive Agreement on 10–year Cooperation amounted \$70 billion, relations roadmap agreement on the horizon of 40 billion–dollar cooperation, and activation of joint commissions between the two countries.

In addition, some developments have been observed in areas of relations between Iran and Russia since the beginning of the nuclear negotiations and preliminary agreements. In this regard, technology sector, formation of a technology committee, and the issue of technology transfer; communication sector, railway, air and rail lines; agreement on power and nuclear plants; industries of oil and gas, mining and metals, and aerospace; and more recently, crops, dairy, meat, and fish products can be mentioned. However, banking and monetary issues, as the major barrier to relations between Tehran and Moscow during the past 6 years, were the most important field influenced by the lifting of sanctions and post-JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) conditions. It seems that economic relations between Tehran and Moscow are waiting for final nail in the coffin of sanctions in order reach desirable relations. The diplomacy of new Iranian government has managed to take effective efforts for improvement of communication and the launch of Iran Air and Mahan flights and reduction of customs, agriculture, livestock, dairy, meat, and fish tariffs for Iranian exports. Efforts made for facilitation and the abolition of visas, negotiations for establishment of a joint investment bank, agreement on Russia's investment in Iran up to \$40 billion, and credit lines of \$5 billion and \$2 billion from Russian banks are among other measures taken with the hope of the lifting of sanctions after the implementation of JCPOA. Especially in food and agricultural products, Iranian producers can benefit from a food market of 140 million people. In one of the last actions by the Iranian authorities, a green customs corridor has been established aimed at facilitation and electronic goods clearance. Finally, the beginning of talks for joining the Eurasian Cooperation Organization in order to provide conditions for Iranian exporters to benefit from preferential trade and establishment of a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Cooperation Organization can be mentioned in this regard which can be greatly effective in the expansion of Iran's non-oil exports in the future.

With the elimination of the main cause of reduced economic relations between Tehran and Moscow, enabling cooperation and money and banking exchanges, and other actions which can save relations between the two countries from the grip of sanctions, it can be expected that the value of economic relations between Iran and Russia exceeds the figure of \$4 billion recorded in the period 2001–2007.

Now, trade relations between Tehran and Moscow are again beginning while Russia is under the pressures of the West and the level of its relations with Turkey has also decreased. Boosting economic ties with Tehran and Moscow, some measures can improve economic interdependence as an infrastructure for political and security relations. In this regard, operation of the North–South corridor, establishment of an airlift for the rapid transfer of food and agricultural products, provision of software, legal, and regulatory infrastructures, and activation of free trade zones such as and Anzali can be mentioned.

Iran and Russia have also cooperated with each other in technical and military fields. After China and India, Iran has become the third military partner of Russia in this period. According to the 15 billion-dollar agreement between Iran and the Soviet Union in 1989, about \$2 billion has been allocated to the purchase of

weapons and related technologies. Despite the pressures imposed by the US and especially Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement in 1995 (according to which no new agreement could be signed on arms transfer after the end of the 1989 ten–year contract), the Russians canceled the above–mentioned agreement and signed a new ten–year military–defense cooperation document with the Iranian Defense Minister. Based on claims of some Russian experts, Moscow will earn annual revenue of \$300 million from military cooperation with Iran. Military–technical cooperation of Russia with Iran underwent fundamental developments after the Kosovo crisis and the rise of Putin. Officials of the two countries reached important agreements on military cooperation and the Russian side insisted on invalidity of Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement. Iran and Russia have decided to continue their military cooperation, consult on security issues, inform each other about military doctrines, army structures, and common security threats, and plan for expansion of military ties, bilateral ties, and training of Iranian military forces in Russian educational institutions. However, these decisions changed in later years under the influence of Russia’s relations with the West, especially after improvement of relations between Russia and the US and Russia’s accession to the resolutions of sanctions on Iran over nuclear case. In the period after nuclear deal, military cooperation between Iran and Russia has again started and could be expanded.

However, bilateral relations between Iran and Russia present major capabilities to be expanded in business and technical areas. In this regard, Russia’s civilian and military technologies are of special importance to Iran and Iranian market can solve part of the market problems of Russian products. In the field of agricultural products, Iran can help Russia to get rid of pressures caused by economic sanctions.

Stability and Balance in Geostrategic Regions

After 1992, Iran and Russia have gradually come to a common understanding of mutual interests in Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Caucasus, as a basis for their cooperation in these regions. The risk of spread of the influence of western powers and their allies and also regional crises into the borders of these two countries will be very effective in the expansion of this cooperation. Hence, the two countries can have more fruitful cooperation on positive cases at the regional level. Iran and Russia have the ability and capacity to establish institutions such as the Caspian Sea organization for settlement of issues, development, security, and cooperation. Such institutions can take effective steps towards regional development and economic, cultural, and political convergences. As a Muslim country and a progressive political system, the Islamic Republic of Iran can propose alternatives to other patterns propagating opposition to Russia. The two countries extremely concerned about the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict and the Islamic Republic of Iran tried to mediate between the parties involved in the crisis. Since 1994, Tehran and Moscow hosted a series of meetings between the parties to the civil war in Tajikistan which led to a compromise in 1996. In addition, Iran–Russia cooperation in support of the Afghan Northern Alliance against Taliban attacks from 1996 to 2001 can be mentioned in this regard.

In fact, Tehran and Moscow believe that extremist ethnic and religious movements in common areas between the two countries can jeopardize their interests. Hence, they have taken each other as a partner not a rival, and made efforts for settlement of issues. Regarding the role of the two countries in geostrategic areas of the Middle East and Central Eurasia and their common interests in this vast arena, Iran–Russia relations are vital and their role in above-mentioned regions requires them to cooperate with each other against the existing and emerging threats. As long as the rules of the game in the international system are based on power play, spheres of influence, and attempts of great powers for maintaining spheres of influence, regional cooperation and assistance will be a basic principle for providing the national interests and security, and establishment of balance in foreign relations is a prerequisite for providing interests and stability of relations with major players at the regional level. Both countries are concerned about the interference of extra-regional powers and both advocate and defend keeping the status quo of regional geopolitical and also the independent and recognized states. Both countries are so worried about radicalism and terrorism that it is the most important area of their bilateral cooperation.

Hence, cooperation between Iran and Russia on regional crises has been very important and effective. From 1996 to 2001, Iran and Russia supported the Afghan Northern Alliance against Taliban in Afghanistan crisis and even Iran used the Russian territory for transit of arms to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. In terms of Syria crisis, cooperation between Iran and Russia at different levels has a history of 5 years, the most recent case of which is the use of Iranian Nojeh Air Base by Russia. This level of cooperation is strategic and extendable and yet not necessarily to the detriment of other countries. If Iran and Russia fail to cooperate with each other in their common regions, especially in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, instability in the region and the disruption of regional balance can be followed by serious consequences for both sides.

International Multipolar and Multilayer System

International system is gradually moving away a unipolar and centralized system in this decade, and approaches toward a multi-polar and pluralistic international system. We witness a multi-polar system, that is to say, USA is an influential international power in various fields, whereas other actors such as European Union, Russia, China and even regional powers have developed new roles. Nowadays, BRICS countries too such as Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa and China have developed more extensive roles. The condensation of the quadruplet world's geostrategic regions which have become closer in the recent couple of decades is another issue along with the international system transformation. China has installed four large energy transfer lines, of which 3 lines are active and the fourth one is under construction. Elsewhere, the European Union is penetrated into the region by Eastern Partnership joint initiative. Georgia has nowadays succeeded in reaching a large trading agreement with the European Union by means of the aforementioned initiative. Therefore, East Asia has reached Caspian domain via China and Euro-Atlantic region has also reached this region and previously disjointed regions, namely the Central Eurasia and the Middle East have developed

higher interactions. This means that, Russia–Iran or Russia–Turkey interactions are all increased and this has created a domain expanding from the Black Sea through the Caspian Sea, a domain which is highly sensitive in which all the world super powers, such as China, USA, Europe, Russia as well as regional powers including Iran, Turkey and even Saudi Arabia have developed serious interactions. The Syrian and Ukrainian crises are clear signs of the new transformation which involves many of the important international actors.

Both countries are against a unipolar, western-oriented international system and the unilateralism of the United States in the international issues. They seek a multi-polar and pluralistic international system in which NATO is not developing, and the political norms and rules of the West is undermining the acknowledged international norms and rules such as the national sovereignty, the Westphalian system and the principle of non-intervention. The most significant joint subjects of Iran' and Russia's foreign policy include prevention of USA's pressure for isolating two governments, higher international manoeuvrability at the international level by cooperating with governments independent and dissatisfied with the existing state as well as preventing NATO's development. Notwithstanding these common interests, rarely do we see a major cooperation between Tehran and Moscow.

The Strategicness of Cooperation

The concept of strategic cooperation between the two countries can be recognized by separating strategic alliance from strategic partnership and defining the strategic affair. Strategic affair is a concept which deals with critical, security, and long-term issues in a competitive environment. Strategic alliance is the highest level of cooperation between two or more states against a shared threat for a long time within the framework of agreements and exact mechanisms, while strategic partnership could mean cooperation against a common threat on a particular subject and period. Since this level of cooperation is not long-term, it is not accurate to use the word "strategic" for it unless this partnership will be repeated in similar cases.

During the past 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between Iran and Russia have relatively fixed and variable in two trajectories. The fixed trajectory is that Iran and Russia have worked together in various forms and special periods of time in common regional area for more than two decades. This cooperation was on Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. After the civil war in Tajikistan in the early 1990s, conflict in Afghanistan during the Taliban era from 1996 to 2001, and Syria crisis since 2012, Tehran and Moscow have military and diplomatic cooperation. This security cooperation was aimed at maintaining the regional stability and security and preventing the spread of terrorism and insecurity. Efforts of Iran and Russia to stabilize the situation in Tajikistan and end the civil war in this country led to the establishment of a state and the results of that agreement have somewhat determined the destiny of Tajikistan so far. It is very difficult to imagine that how Tehran and Moscow could cope with terrorism in Syria and how the situation

in Syria and the region would be without cooperation between Iran and Russia. Without this cooperation, not only Syria and the Middle East but also the Caucasus and territories of the borders of Iran and Russia would face major problems and challenges.

However, can Iran–Russia cooperation be taken as a strategic partnership? Naturally, this cooperation cannot be considered a strategic alliance in any way, but, according to the definition given to the concept of strategic partnership, Iran–Russia cooperation on regional issues can be taken strategic because both states reached a recurring military and security cooperation in intelligence and operational levels to cope with insecurity and stabilize and maintain regional balance in all three cases of their cooperation on the Tajik civil war, Taliban rule over Afghanistan, and Syria crisis. Therefore, it is wrong to refer this cooperation as strategic partnership.

Apart from this strategic partnership at the regional level, bilateral relations between the two countries have been faced with more ups and downs, especially in terms of sanctions during the presidency of Medvedev who adopted closer policies to the West from 2009 to 2012. The volume of trade exchange between Iran and Russia was nearly \$4 billion until 2008 and then this figure reduced to \$1–1.5 billion in the period 2009–2012. However, in the international level, there has been a shared vision between the two countries that is the concern about creation of a unipolar system and unilateralism of the US, NATO expansion, and ignorance of national sovereignty and interference in internal affairs of countries by the West and Western institutions. However, these common international interests and stances have been only realized on the desk and announced policies and made for no certain cooperation or new event in relations between the two countries.

Perhaps the most important problem in relations between Iran and Russia in the last decades is that these interactions are not still organized and stabilized. This depends on many factors, the most important of which is that Iran–Russia relations are highly influenced by interactions between Russia and the West and still lack an independent and self-reliant basis of mutual interests. Attitude and mentality of Iranians and the subjective and objective structures affecting the attitude towards Russia is another important factors which compounds the interactions between these two states. The point which is emphasized is that as long as relations between Iran and Russia are not based on institutionalized cooperation and specified agreements and arrangements, cooperation between these two countries will be under the influence of relations between Russia and the West. This will be to the detriment of interests of both sides in a medium and long term.

Given the worsening security situation in the world, geographical spread of crisis from Africa to China, confusion of the US and the West about these crises, concurrent involvement of the West in the Middle East, Central Eurasia, and East Asia, and more importantly Iran–Russia cooperation on regional issues which is not necessarily against other states, Tehran and Moscow can improve their relations on these issues, think about continuous cooperation, and take steps for an organized strategic partnership on security, stability, and balance of power in common areas.

Conclusion

Two neighboring states of Iran and Russia are not threats to each other and despite some rivalry, both could provide bilateral, regional and international interests for each other. Except the regional ties, Tehran and Moscow have been facing various difficulties in bilateral and international cooperation and the difficulties for the former still remain unchanged. Cooperation on trade and technology are good bases for expanding bilateral relationship. In that regard, Russian military and civilian technologies hugely matter to Iran and the Iranian market could resolve the problems of the Russian one. More specifically, Iran could reduce the burden of western sanctions against the Russian agricultural market.

Iranian–Russian cooperation in regional crises has been a vital issue; on Afghanistan, both supported the Northern Alliance against Taliban and even Tehran used the Russian territories to militarily assist the Northern Alliance. On Syria, both states have been worked together in different levels and Russia's strike on terrorist groups in Syria from Iranian Nojeh Airbase is the most significant and last instance of regional cooperation. This level of cooperation between Tehran and Moscow is deemed 'strategic' and could be expanded and not necessarily against the interests of other states. If Tehran and Moscow could not jointly work on South Caucasus and the Middle East, instability and changing the balance of power would sweep the regions, to the detriment of both Iran and Russia. Despite the fact that Tehran and Moscow have the same ideas on regional stability, combatting against terrorism, maintaining the regional balance of power and safeguarding the territorial integrity, it seems the Syrian crisis and the security collaboration between Iran and Russia would be a foundation to make strategic cooperation between the two neighboring states feasible.

With respect to the given definition on the concept of 'strategic cooperation', Tehran–Moscow regional cooperation could be named as strategic one, due to the fact that both governments have been operationally and militarily cooperating on the civil war in Tajikistan, fight against Taliban in Afghanistan and the recent Syrian crisis in the name of confronting insecurity, establishing stability and maintaining the states quo in the region. Therefore, a kind of strategic partnership which is in the interests of Iran, Russia and even other nations against instability and terrorism is visible throughout the region.

Topic 2. Iranian and Russian Perspectives on the Global System

The Transformation of the World Order

Radical changes are taking place in global politics. From the bipolar world of the Cold War period through the failed project to create a unipolar order, we are now seeing a shift towards a new, polycentric, model of organizing international relations. The United States has been losing ground in world affairs, and influence of European states has been weakening, as well. The United States and the West, in general, have increasingly shirked their responsibility to find solutions to emerging problems. Countries such as Russia and Iran are playing an important role in shaping the new world order, although they, along with other powers that claim to have a stake in shaping international policy, are frequently ignored by the Western states.

While the new principles of international relations are far from being formulated, the changes in the Westphalian legacy have already been drastic. This legacy included the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, respect for national sovereignty, and obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force.

Both the interpretation of the above principles and their implementation have changed significantly. Some states feel they are entitled to interpret these principles in a different way, taking unilateral steps such as forming coalitions in order to use force (without appropriate UN decisions), or imposing unilateral sanctions that contradict UN principles, as well as those of international economic and trade organizations, for example, the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Aggressive moves that are against the Westphalian principles are being justified in the international legal environment. Altering national borders, breaking up states and committing other gross violations of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states have become widespread. Contrary to the United Nations Charter, the threat or use of force have become a tool frequently employed by major powers.

In order to respond to the changing international environment, the supporters of a polycentric world strive to form coalitions to address global challenges. These countries seek a world order based on the principles elaborated within multilateral institutions. The principles should be comprehensive, global, effective and fair.

The transition to a polycentric model of international relations is still in its infancy. The major players in global politics have been active in formulating the new rules of the game on the international arena, trying to reserve for themselves the most significant roles in the future world order. The currently unstable global policy has largely been driven by these aspirations.

Globalization, technological advancements and the communications revolution are just a few of the factors that influence the scope of global instability. All this

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has increased instability significantly. There is reason to believe that the instability of global politics continue because of these factors. The complexity and unpredictability of this period makes international players act in a riskier manner.

Actors lose their positions on the international arena because they are unable to make accurate assessments of their own capabilities and the capabilities of others, and they often misinterpret the intentions of other players. Conversely, a proper assessment of the specific features of this transitional period, as well as good planning and having a realistic view of the strengths and weaknesses of their own policies and those of other actors will help states strengthen their positions on the international arena.

Given the transition from a bipolar to a polycentric world, the problems of international security have been growing in terms of their scale and severity. The key international security concerns are: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; terrorism and religious extremism; and the crises in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and the Persian Gulf.

The Syrian crisis has had a significant impact on global security. Russia–Iran cooperation may prevent the crisis from becoming a chronic cause of regional and global instability.

The Afghan settlement is an important global security issue. It would be a mistake to talk about the establishment of a security system in the region, or even on a global scale, without internal settlement in Afghanistan. Its neighbours, including Russia and Iran, will play a major part in preventing Afghanistan from slipping into chaos and stopping the growth of threats to regional and global security. The role of Russia and Iran as major actors in the Afghan settlement cannot be overestimated.

Global security includes close cooperation among all countries without exception, whatever their national interests may be, focusing their efforts on addressing common threats. The ability of Russia, Iran and other advocates of a polycentric world order to ensure this level of cooperation will largely determine how and when the transition from a bipolar to a polycentric world will be completed.

Regions play an important part in shaping the polycentric world order. Globalization, which is among the key factors of this transitional period, is accompanied by the growing role of regions and their politics. International relations, in general, have been largely underpinned by regional cooperation.

Given the vagueness of the concept, the word “region” may be interpreted both as a sphere of cooperation and a competition arena. Regional actors may use existing regional structures to establish dialogue with each other, and with actors from other regions. The lack of efficiency of such structures in certain cases and their total inefficiency in others, or the fact that they are simply ignored, may hamper intra- and inter-regional dialogue. However, the emergence of external or regional rivals makes other regional powers pay more attention to regional structures and attach more importance to their regional and global politics.

Concepts such as a “multiregional world order” and the “world of regions” have been formulated in international relations theory. These notions reflect the changes

that are taking place in global politics. The greater interconnection between the global and the regional levels of global politics has become obvious for major international actors, which have become more active, trying to benefit from the opportunities arising from regional characteristics. It is for this reason that existing and the emerging regional and interregional coalitions are becoming a major phenomenon in the period of transition from a bipolar to a polycentric world.

In order to have a better understanding of opportunities brought about by a strategic partnership between Russia and Iran, we should also pay close attention to changes taking place not only at the global level, but also at the regional level. The Middle East, which faces dramatic security changes, is among the key regions. The possibilities of conventional security tools, such as the armed forces, have been exhausted in this region. Third-party actors, especially the United States, are no longer able to call the shots in the Middle East. For the United States, the costs of implementing regional policy have grown significantly, and the policy forms, including the methods of using force, have changed. European countries are not ready to play a decisive role in the Middle East, although they believe they have a stake in the region.

Russia–Iran cooperation with the countries in the Middle East gains prominence in this context. The increased activity of the two states has become apparent in many spheres of regional policy. Russia–Iran cooperation in the Middle East may form a basis for a bilateral strategic partnership.

Another region of importance for Russia and Iran includes five Caspian states, as well as other countries in the Caspian Basin. Beside the fact that these countries have rich opportunities in terms of natural resources and the economy as a whole, they may also play an important part in global peace-making and stabilization efforts. A major challenge facing these countries is the development of a common understanding of the global political landscape and their own actions within these conditions.

New regions, beside the traditional Middle East and the Caspian area, are also emerging. The customary “Asia–Pacific” has been largely ousted by the “Indo–Pacific”. This concept, which encompasses the states bordering the Indian and Pacific oceans reflects new political and economic relationships and also new security concerns, including in energy security.

For all the countries in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia unified under the concept of an Indo–Pacific region, there is the major problem of ensuring energy imports, which, if unresolved, would prevent them from keeping pace with normal economic growth. This is just an example, demonstrating the vast opportunities that Russia and Iran have in the Indo–Pacific region.

Russia and Iran: A Lack of Strategic Vision

It is widely believed in Russia that the West’s policy to some extent corresponds with Russian interests, as it creates additional incentives for the development of a special relationship between Moscow and Tehran. This belief is not only wrong, but even dangerous. The Russia–Iran strategic partnership should not be built upon political considerations. This is a too fragile foundation.

There is still no real foundation to Russia–Iran relations, one that would make it possible to call it a genuine strategic partnership, rather than a declarative one. Furthermore, despite the needs generated by regional and global level–concerns, Russia and Iran have failed to establish adequate economic, scientific, technical and educational ties.

The experience of cooperation between Russia and Iran in addressing global and regional problems indicates the lack of a strategic vision. This is confirmed by the examples of Afghanistan and Syria.

In the 1990s, Russia and Iran made joint efforts to limit the influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. These efforts included, but were not limited to, assistance to the Northern Alliance, the Taliban’s chief opponent. Despite their successful cooperation in Afghanistan, Russia and Iran failed to form a common vision of the desired future for the country. Since Russia and Iran lacked a strategic vision of Afghanistan’s development after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the initiative in determining the direction of this development was snatched by the United States and its allies.

A similar situation is observed in Russia–Iran cooperation on the issues of Syria and Islamic State. Despite their close positions on these concerns, Russia and Iran have been unable to come to a common understanding over the desired development of Syria and the Middle East region in general. Russia and Iran still lack a common approach to the key mechanisms of settlement in Syria, as well as controls for the further development of the situation in the territories where hostilities continue.

Russia and Iran lack a long–term vision of specific problems. The vision for these and other problems will become an important basis of a strategic partnership between Russia and Iran.

Shared Views on Global Issues

The ideas and principles that underpin the relationship between Russia and Iran were set out in the Treaty on Foundations of Relations and Principles of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran signed on March 12, 2001. This is the foundation that gives scope to multi–faceted cooperation.

Russia and Iran have close or common approaches to the key concerns of global and the regional politics, be it, for instance, creating a polycentric world order, strengthening the role of the United Nations in international affairs, the situation in Afghanistan, or the Syrian settlement. The overlapping stances of Russia and Iran ensure greater stability and security, both on the regional and the global scale. Russia and Iran have secured a firm ground for continued dialogue in this perspective, and for further strengthening the Russia–Iran partnership in general.

There are significant opportunities for cooperation between Russia and Iran in establishing a new system of international relations based on equality, respect, the non–use of force, the independence of all states – whatever their size and power – and, what is most important today, a sense of justice. The latter is not

used widely enough in international relations. Introducing the sense of justice into international relations meets the interests of both Russia and Iran.

Disagreement

Discussions between Russia and Iran demonstrated two interconnected contradictions in the positions of the two countries. The first was connected with Iran's nuclear programme.

Russia has always been interested in lifting the international sanctions against Iran, and has never supported the introduction of unilateral sanctions against the country. However, Russia voted for several resolutions of the UN Security Council on the Iranian nuclear programme: resolutions 1696 and 1737 (in 2006); 1747 (in 2007); 1803 and 1835 (in 2008); and 1929 (in 2010). Resolutions 1737, 1747 and 1929 imposed sanctions against Iran.

Russia has never vetoed or even abstained from voting. The reason for Russia voting this way in the UN Security Council is evident. Russia was interested in Iran meeting the UNSC requirement, i.e. curbing its nuclear programme and ensuring its maximum transparency vis-à-vis the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This is how Moscow saw a way for Iran to exit the sanctions regime once and for all.

Russia's key interests include strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime, regional stability and large-scale cooperation with Iran.

Another contradiction is related to the position of some Iranian experts who believe that strategic partnership between Russia and Iran may be aimed, firstly, at balancing the West and, secondly, at curbing its anti-Russia and anti-Iran policies. For most Russian actors, an important feature of Russia-Iran relations is that they should not be directed against third-party players.

Cooperation Priorities

A Russia-Iran strategic partnership should be based on a robust and transparent infrastructure. The development of relations in such fields as energy, transport, advanced technologies (including information and space technologies) can and should play a key role in shaping a new model of Russia-Iran relations. An independent position of the two states on the global arena may become an important factor in formulating the agenda of such regional organizations as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

However, trust between Russia and Iran is not enough for successful cooperation; to this end, they need to understand each other's goals and interests correctly. Russia and Iran should talk more about how they interpret each other's interests, adjust these interpretations and avoid misinterpretations in the future. Therefore, positive cooperation between the scientific and expert communities of Russia and Iran to facilitate the establishment of a strategic partnership gains extra importance in this context.

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How to analyze Iranian and Russian approach to the international system? Given the global status of Iran and Russia and their recent improving bilateral relationship, this is a fundamental question for researchers and professionals of foreign policy and international relations; however, the question cannot be answered solely based on current stereotypes and patterns. To answer this question, it should be first noted that for some time no fixed and coherent international system has existed. Indeed, a new international system is about to form.

The emergence of this new international system means that major players, in particular the Western states, continue to attempt to influence the formation of this international system by developing various discourses, interpretations, and narratives and applying a wide range of concepts and propositions. In other words, according to a common term in modern methodology, they are attempting to turn their own discourses into the globally dominant one. In addition, it should be noted that the international system is not formed only by providing discursive campaigns, narratives, and realities; materialistically objective and effective forces should be also taken into account. In other words, the interaction between international discourses and current realities should be considered as a simultaneous association. From this angle, there are dozens of real power system issues at the international level which are still unsettled with no bright future. The international system is currently taking form and a long road must be travelled before a fixed stage is reached.

This dynamic combination does not mean, however, that Iranian and Russian approaches are not part of this ongoing discussion and debate. Their set of thoughts, words, and deeds reveal their approach to the emerging international system. Both nations may have different approaches to the international system and the theoreticians and professionals dealing with international affairs may have different interpretations. However, given three concepts of ‘polarization of power in the international system’, ‘power institutions in the international system’, and ‘effective trends in the international system’, a relatively dominant view about the international system common to Iran and Russia can be discerned. A close examination of these three concepts would reveal a combination of similarities and differences in the Iranian and Russian approaches to the international system.

A) Polarization of Power in International System; The roots of Iran and Russia discourses in regard to the polarization of power differ from each other. Russia is a global power, whereas Iran is a regional one; these respective power standings generate own respective layers and complexities. Russia became a global power during the Cold War when it became one of the two global superpowers; however, this transformation was not simple. Moreover, post–Soviet Russia has had its ups and downs in the past two decades and only recently and finally reached a relatively stable power position. While pre–revolutionary Iran, as a regional power, was dependent on the West, it became an effective and independent regional power after the Islamic Revolution. Likewise, Iran has had its ups and downs in reaching its current position, especially its capacity in providing domestic security without depending on foreign powers.

Despite these different origins, there are certain similarities between these states when it comes to the polarization of power in the world, with a common denominator of opposition to the idea of a unipolar system. Both countries have a common position: they disapprove of the West being the focal point and center of power. In return, both states mutually support the discourse that tends to promote multipolarity in the international system. Another phenomenon that brings the two together regarding polarization in the international system is the necessity of considering the major places of power in the emerging international system. This view, namely polarization in the international system, should be put together with another element called power institutions.

B) Power Institutions in International System; Obviously, the memberships of Iran and Russia in international power institutions differ from each other. Russia is a permanent member in some of the oldest international institutions, such as the Security Council of the United Nations (UNSC). However, it seems that the two countries object to any new institutions with exclusive power. In that regard, the West's effort to expand NATO in a way to become a global institution with the sole centrality of western players is not compatible with the views of Iran and Russia. In general, the globalizing of West-oriented security and its institutions is not acceptable to Tehran and Moscow.

Clearly, Russia wants to create independent and joint institutions both inside (e.g. The Eurasian Economic Union) and outside (e.g. Shanghai Cooperation Organization) the former Soviet Union. The Russian approach to Iran's cooperation with these institutions is both significant and positive, although it cannot be said that Russia persistently supports Iran in joining these institutions. 'BRICs' is another example that despite the fact that its geographic sheet goes beyond the conventional boundaries of Eurasia, it is preferable to Russia. Although being an observer state of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran seems to be pleased with the launch and development of these institutions. Moreover, Iran sees these institutions as an attempt to oppose the monopolization of international western-led power institutions. In order to understand the Iranian and Russian approaches to the international system, the trends and the decision-making ones in particular, should be considered along with a clear picture of power institutions.

C) Effective Trends in International System; Iran and Russia have mutually protested trends that have violated the framework of international law. In particular they have voiced serious concern about decisions in regard to important issues such as war and peace in the international system. In this regard, the events in the Middle East since 2011 onwards need to be analyzed. Although voting for the 1970 and 1973 UN resolutions on Libya, Russia has objected to their interpretation by the Western countries regarding the innovative concept of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P). In fact, military intervention to Libya in 2011 made Russia feel that it had been betrayed by the West.

Developments in the Syrian crisis along with Iranian-Russian opposition to western-led moves have demonstrated agreements between Moscow and Iran on the decision-making trends influencing fundamental and critical international issues. Regardless of this mutual opinion, political systems cannot be changed by any

outside decision, according to the strategic calculation of both countries. Indeed, this is a strategic assessment as well as upholding of a legal principle. Furthermore, human rights and the tenets of humanitarianism should not be abused to change the geographic maps or as a justification for interfering in the affairs of other states.

Taking everything into account, studying the Iranian and Russian approach to the international system along with knowing the similarities and differences requires considering three concepts, namely ‘polarization of power’, ‘power institutions’, and ‘power trends’ in the international system. There may be uncertainties and various interpretations about the similarities and differences between the two neighboring states; however, there is no doubt that Russia and Iran, as global and regional powers respectively, play a key role in forming and shaping the international system.

Topic 3. Iran, Russia and the West

The term “strategic partnership” is very popular in Moscow. Over the years, it has been used to describe Russia’s relations with various countries, including the United States, China, Belarus and Chile, and even supranational associations (the European Union, for example). These days, the words “strategic partnership” can often be heard when referring to relations between Moscow and Tehran. Talks of a strategic partnership between Russia and Iran – including at the summit level – have persisted since the mid-1990s.

An important, although not entirely politically correct, question should be asked here: all the histrionic rhetoric aside, do we have reason enough to call current Russia–Iran relations a strategic partnership? Or, what we are perhaps talking about is a tactical union between two very different countries. Maybe even an important and valuable alliance for the two countries at the current stage of their development?

Let’s begin by trying to clarify what the term “strategic partnership” actually means with regard to international relations. What is needed in order to form such a partnership? And under what conditions? Among the varying definitions of strategic partnership and the different aspects of the term that experts choose to focus on, four basic characteristics tend to stand out.

The first is the existence of a wide range of long-term common interests – interests that are independent of the current political situation or the actions of third parties. Having a common enemy or suffering a severe regional crisis are by no means a guarantee that a strategic partnership will be formed. Crises come and go, and a one-time enemy could easily become an ally in the future.

The second characteristic is the willingness of the sides to set themselves major strategic goals, which can only be achieved through sustained joint efforts. This is how a strategic partnership differs from a tactical union. An example of the latter is the agreement reached by Russia and the United States in the autumn of 2013 with regard to the issue of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The third is the existence of a well-developed legal and regulatory framework for cooperation, as well as effective mechanisms for cooperating in various fields. In other words, political declarations and summit meetings are not enough for relations between two countries to be called a full-fledged strategic partnership.

The fourth characteristic is a high level of trust among the political leaders of the countries involved in the partnership and, what is more, a high level of mutual affection, understanding and trust among the people of the two countries. Without broad public support, even the warmest of friendships between national leaders, even constant interaction among the bureaucratic machines of two countries is not enough to ensure stable relations.

Some Russian analysts go even further, arguing that strategic relations are only possible if the partners share social, cultural, religious and other “fundamental

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values”, because, at the end of the day, the only thing that can be relied upon to ensure stable relations is the existence of common values. Others stress the importance of social interaction, including humanitarian, educational, scientific, cultural and other contacts between societies.

Even if we were to consider these conditions somewhat excessive, there is little to suggest that current interaction between Russia and Iran qualifies as a full strategic partnership. At best, we can say that the groundwork has been laid for such a partnership to develop in the future.

Let’s start with common interests. As a rule, Russian political discourse emphasizes the common interests of the two countries in counteracting the hegemonic designs of the United States and the West as a whole, and in the Middle East in particular. They also note that Russia and Iran face common challenges of political radicalism and extremism in their various manifestations. That is, priority is given to issues of security and geopolitics. What is more, the main proponents of a geopolitical rapprochement between Russia and Iran are the most radical anti-western and anti-American forces, which are represented primarily by “ideologues,” rather than experts. Significantly less attention is paid to the objective analysis of the existing (and entirely natural) differences of interests between the two countries on specific issues. But these differences deserve no less careful attention than the areas of common interests.

For example, Russia and Iran objectively compete on the global hydrocarbons market. However, this is not an insurmountable obstacle for cooperation in that sphere. Moscow and Tehran cannot possibly have identical stances on many regional issues, for instance, regarding Israel. There are also differences concerning international legal status of the Caspian Sea. We should also not forget that Iran is a Shia country, while most Russian Muslims are Sunni Muslims.

The differences between Moscow and Tehran should under no circumstances be dramatized, but they speak to the fact that, in reality, the balance of interests between Russia and Iran is far more complex than it appears to those who are fond of simplified geopolitical constructs. Ignoring this complexity, turning a picture of many colours black and white, will lead to inevitable disappointments and problems.

And what about common strategic goals? Without attempting to diminish in any way the achievements of Russia–Iran interaction, it should be noted that bilateral cooperation largely was and still is of a situational nature. This cooperation could be defined as the more or less successful reaction of the two countries to the emerging problems, challenge, and crises, such as the Taliban coming into power in Afghanistan, the civil war in Tajikistan, the intervention of the United States and their allies in Iraq, the Arab Spring, the crises in Syria and Yemen, the aggravation of the situation in Nagorno–Karabakh, etc.

All of that is extremely important, and due credit should be given to Russian and Iranian diplomats who, as a rule, succeeded in finding appropriate and mutually acceptable approaches to extremely complicated regional problems. However, in and of itself, timely interaction in crisis situations is not enough to create a

strategic partnership; another requirement is common strategic goals, that is, the existence of a long-term positive action programme, one that pre-emptively reacts to crises rather than merely reacts to them. Drafting joint Russia–Iran proposals (“a road map”) on the creation of a collective regional security system in the Persian Gulf could be a promising move in this direction. The “Greater Central Asia” region could become another area for putting forward joint initiatives. In a broader context, it would be extremely important to compare the views of Moscow and Tehran on how to restore the manageability of the global international system as a whole.

The legislative basis for Russia–Iran relations is extremely underdeveloped (especially compared to such areas of Russian foreign policy as Russia’s relations with the European Union). The same is true regarding the mechanisms for implementing interaction in various areas. For instance, in the economic sphere, there are the Russian–Iranian Business Council, the Permanent Russian–Iranian Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, and the Forum on Economic and Industrial Cooperation, but in many ways, these are purely nominal entities. This in part explains the unsatisfactory state of trade and economic relations between Russia and Iran in terms of both volume and structure. In their economic relations, Russia and Iran follow the path of the least resistance, confining themselves to individual large “showcase” projects carried out with active governmental support (the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant) and military technical cooperation.

We should recall that, back in 2007, the parties envisioned grand plans for increasing the annual trade turnover to \$200 billion over ten years, with cooperation in energy, transportation, medicine, biotechnology, metallurgy, space exploration, etc. Most of these plans remain just that – plans. Of course, it is premature to speak about a strategic partnership without a solid economic basis, without large interest groups in both countries lobbying large-scale joint projects in a wide range of areas. And, as a bare minimum, the two sides should, as soon as possible, conduct a bilateral analysis of the main reasons why Russia–Iran relations are just “spinning their wheels” and then identify priority measures to correct the situation.

Finally, the problem of trust between the people of Russia and Iran is far from being fully resolved, if only because they have very poor knowledge of each other and what they do know is often “hearsay” received primarily from western sources, which are not always objective, to say the least. Besides, the history of Russia–Iran bilateral relations has various pages, and it probably would be wrong to claim that old grievances and stereotypes and biases that had formed over centuries have no influence on the public mood.

Even in recent years, relations between the two countries have had their down points (in summer 2010, for instance, when Russia banned supplies of S–300 missile systems to Iran). Public opinion of Russia suffered as a result: the conservative powers suspect that Moscow sees Tehran as a bargaining chip in its greater game with the West, and the reformers’ camp often associates Russia with archaic anti-western forces incapable of offering Iran anything of substance.

That is why, when talking about Russia–Iran relations, it is more appropriate to use the sceptical formula “cautious partnership,” rather than the optimistic “strategic partnership.”

Thus, current relations between Moscow and Tehran do contain many positive elements, but they have not yet reached the level of a strategic partnership. And without persistent efforts on both sides, without political will, without sitting down and working on the mistakes made, and without bringing in new “stakeholders” – both in Russia and Iran – such a partnership will hardly materialize. And, of course, the prospects of such a partnership greatly depend on internal development processes in both countries.

As regards relations with the West, Russia and Iran should proceed from the following premises when constructing the “Western vector” of their foreign policies:

First, separating themselves from the West or even pitching their own “non-western” system against the western system of the global economy and politics is not feasible in the foreseeable future. At their respective stages of development, both Russia and Iran need cutting-edge technologies and investments above anything else. The West has been and still is the main source of both. It is likely that this situation will change in the distant future, but for the time being, China, India and other “rising powers” depend to a great extent on being included in the economic, technological, and financial chains, which begin in the West.

Second, the West should not be “demonized” as a force that inevitably opposes traditional values, national interests and the sovereignty of Russia and Iran. Today, the West is far from being united even in its basic positions on the principal problems of international relations. It would seem that the differences between the United States and Europe, as well as the differences within individual countries, will remain and even deepen. These differences extend to issues that are important for Russia and Iran (economic sanctions, the Syrian conflict, the Arab–Israel settlement and the fight against international terrorism). Such pluralism affords additional opportunities for politics in Moscow and Tehran.

Third, analysing possible options for Russian and Iranian foreign policy in terms of “pro- or anti-Western” appears unproductive and inaccurate. Russian foreign policy must be “pro-Russian,” just like Iran’s policy must be “pro-Iranian.” Foreign policy should primarily be based on a clear understanding of short- and long-term national interests. This understanding determines the acceptable parameters of current concessions and possible compromises, and it applies to relations with the West, too.

The development of Russia–Iran relations should not be viewed as an alternative to each country’s relations with the West. Bilateral interaction between Moscow and Tehran gives each party additional trump cards in their relations with western partners. And these trump cards could and should be used, taking into account the fact that the role the West plays in resolving problems in the Middle East, and in Asia as a whole, will decrease with time, rather than increase. Reformers both in Russia and Iran tend to overestimate that role, viewing the West as a univer-

sal means for solving all the problems that Moscow and Tehran face. This view appears highly dubious and it has no historical basis.

Specific aspects of interaction between Russia and Iran, the possible limits for cooperation and the potential costs of such cooperation could become subjects for interaction between analytical centres in the two countries. Unfortunately, there is little to boast of in this area right now.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the USA for the foreseeable future face a common threat to their respective national security. That threat is called here ‘the Greater West Asian Crisis’ that stretches from Turkey in the west, through Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Lebanon, Yemen and the Caucasus to Pakistan and Afghanistan in the east.⁴⁹ This ‘Greater West Asian Crisis’ consists of a series of interlocking regional crises emerging from a combination of domestic political, ethnic, and/or sectarian cleavages and from regional geo-political rivalries between local state actors in which the USA, Russia, and to a lesser extent China, powers not immediately bordering these countries, play important, but not decisive roles. In other words, three dynamics interlock and form a Gordian Knot named the Greater West Asian Crisis: (1) tactical and strategic trends of these non-regional powers; (2) tactical and strategic trends of this region’s state actors; and (3) political and socio-economic trends within the region’s polities. Moreover, as a result of these domestic and regional geo-political conditions violent non-state actors (VNSA), such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, amongst others, have emerged, adding a volatile, dangerous element to this Greater West Asian Crisis and to its ability to spread instability into areas bordering it, such as Europe, the republics of Central Asia, Russia and the USA. The crises facing this Greater West Asia are individually well-known –Palestine–Israel, Turkey–Kurdish issue, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iranian–Saudi geo-political tension, Yemen, Afghanistan and VNSA – and need no discussion here. They are perhaps individually manageable to varying degrees and perhaps even solvable. However, as this short article proposes, in light of the interlocking nature of these crises one or two triggers could spark all of them simultaneously and thus plunge Iran, Russia, and the USA into a vortex of ethnic, sectarian, and inter-state conflicts accompanied by the expansion of VNSA that could easily surpass the destruction, intractability and consequences of the Syrian conflict. It is argued here that these triggers could be deep political instability and consequent state breakdown in Pakistan and/or Iraq.

This short article argues that at the present time the military emasculation of ISIS and other VNSA and a negotiated settlement regulating Syria’s political future are the immediate priorities for Iran, Russia, and the USA. However, these three powers need to pay more analytical and contingency planning to the crises gaining momentum in Iraq and Pakistan, two countries situated at opposing sides of the geographical conception of a Greater West Asia. They cannot afford to be caught off guard as they were in regard to the emergence and power of ISIS in Syria.

The unique geo-political and political positions of Iran, Russia, and the USA in this Greater West Asia provide them with both the opportunity and responsibility to manage these two looming crises. Placed between Iraq and Pakistan, Iran can exercise political influence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, Iran, the largest polity in the region, has strong state structures in comparison with its immediate neighbors while it is not plagued by the deep and destabilizing ethnic and sectarian fault lines seen in Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria. Russia, as a great regional power, with vital national security interests at

⁴⁹ This is a reformulated and modified form of the term which was first used by Fred Halliday in *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics, and Ideology*. Cambridge, 2005.

stake along its southern borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia, enjoys variable levels of political influence backed by a willingness to use force when necessary, unlike the geo-politically weak European Union and even leading European powers, such as France and the UK. The USA, despite changes in the dynamics of global politics, is, in the recent words of Russian President Vladimir Putin, ‘...the only superpower. We accept this...’⁵⁰ and thus continues to play a decisive role in the region. Despite the geo-political and ideological tensions between Washington, Moscow, and Tehran, the managing of these two looming crises requires forms of implicit and explicit co-operation and co-ordination between them based on a tactical flexibility that regulates the intensity of their trilateral interactions in regard to Iraq and Pakistan. If even limited steps are not taken in this direction the fallout from political instability and state breakdown in Iraq and/or Pakistan will exercise a very negative influence on the situation throughout Greater West Asia and ultimately Russia, Europe and the USA.

Pakistan

The challenge posed by Pakistan has two main aspects. One aspect is Pakistan’s security and world view that is singularly focused on India and by extension the Kashmir issue. This worldview has dictated Pakistan’s policy in regard to Afghanistan and Afghan Taliban which are considered by Islamabad to be pillars in its security and geo-political approach to India. On the one hand, an Afghanistan firmly located in a Pakistani sphere of influence provides Islamabad with additional military and geo-political leverage in its struggle with India. On the other hand, a stable relationship between Kabul and New Delhi is seen as a direct threat to Pakistan’s standing and security in the region. It should be remembered that relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan since the latter’s founding in 1947 have been relatively hostile and tension-ridden. Afghanistan has never recognized the Durand Line drawn by the British in 1893 that situated Pashtun lands, such as Peshawar, within the British-controlled Raj, and thus still lays claim to parts of northern Pakistan. Thus, since the late 1940s India and Afghanistan were brought together by mutual hostility toward Pakistan.

This singular focus by the Pakistani elite on India, as well as fear of Pashtun irredentism, explains Islamabad’s support of the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s during whose rule Pakistani influence in the country reached its peak, and reluctance since 2001 to deal decisively with the Afghan Taliban within the borders of Pakistan. After the US overthrow of the Taliban Pakistan has resorted to asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan, viewing the Afghan Taliban as a cost-effective and easily-deniable means of controlling events in that country. Of course this conflict is also shaped by issues internal to Afghanistan that are shaped by challenges facing any multi-national state. In particular, the divide between the more rural and less educated Pashtuns of the Eshaqzai tribe and the more urbane and educated Durrani Pashtun tribes interlocks with the Pakistani factor. Karzai and the current president Ghani come from this tribe. The Duranni, in order to solidify their position, have sought to empower the country’s other ethnic groups, namely Tajiks,

⁵⁰ Speech of President V. Putin at St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, 17 June 2016.

Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Pakistan sees these moves as the institutionalization of the end of their influence in the country. Thus, it is more reluctant to move against its last remaining conduit for influence, the Afghan Taliban. However, political instability that Pakistani-backed Taliban creates inside the Afghanistan, along with the type of religious ideology it espouses, represents a threat to Iran, India, the republics of Central Asia and ultimately Russia. It is worth remembering that in the 1990s Russia and Iran aided the Northern Alliance in its struggle against the Pakistani-backed Taliban. In the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September the US finally joined the cause against the Taliban and Pakistani foreign policy in the region.

The Bush and then Obama presidencies became increasingly frustrated with the inability and/or reluctance of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment to break with the Afghan Taliban. Throughout the 2000s elements within this establishment gave sanctuary and support to the leadership and regular members of the Afghan Taliban. Both the US and Afghan governments have long blamed Taliban sanctuaries in Baluchistan, especially in its capital Quetta, as the main cause for the resilience and expansion of the Taliban insurgency. Islamabad's reluctance to break with the Afghan Taliban is rooted in its use of such militant groups to achieve tactical and strategic foreign policy goals in the region. In sum, the Afghan Taliban was and remains a tool of Pakistani foreign policy, despite the threats of such a militant group to the stability of its neighbors. Consequently, Afghan elite and popular opinion in regard to Pakistan has become very hostile, while relations between the two countries remain tension-ridden and hostile. As late as 13 June 2016 border clashes in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar between the two countries once again took place with killed and wounded on both sides.

In 2012 the USA came out openly against Pakistan's activities in Afghanistan and, in a sign of its rising frustration with Islamabad, announced its support for Indian training of the Afghani armed forces. At the end of May 2016, US launched a drone strike in Pakistani Baluchistan killing Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, the leader of the Afghan militant Taliban. The drone strike was also a sign of the deteriorating situation within Pakistan and of lingering questions about Pakistan's willingness to deal with Taliban. While recently the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment had been aiding the CIA in its drone campaign against Al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban in the northwestern tribal areas, it had rejected Washington's repeated requests to carry out drone strikes in Baluchistan against Afghan Taliban.

It is unclear what Pakistan wants in Afghanistan at this time. If, in reality as some claim, it seeks through use of the Taliban to create managed chaos in Afghanistan as a way of maintaining its influence, then sooner or later Russia, Iran and the United States will face security threats coming from both countries. The ability of Pakistan to manage chaos in Afghanistan is doubtful. After all, it is unable to deal effectively with those militant groups operating within Pakistan who are threats to the Pakistani state. If, however, the security worldview of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment has indeed changed—as yet there is no convinc-

ing evidence reflecting this—then the inability of the Pakistani state to deal with both Afghan and Pakistan Taliban is a worrying sign of a failing state that could easily evolve into an exporter of instability and militant groups in the region and even beyond.

Thus, the second aspect of the challenge is the ongoing weakening of the Pakistani state which is increasingly unable to control and/or liquidate the myriad militant groups within Pakistan. These groups not only represent a threat to the Pakistani state and society, but also to the country's neighbors. 'As anti-state violent insurgencies and terrorism go, the Pakistani case is anomalous in that the existential militant threat it is facing today originated, to a large extent, through support of, not despite, the Pakistani state'⁵¹ given the use of militant groups as a tool of foreign policy by the Pakistani state since the early 1980s. These groups have been traditionally divided into four groups: anti-Pakistani state, anti-US/NATO/Russia, anti-Indian, and sectarian, with particular venom for Shi'ism and then Christianity. The more well-known of these groups are: Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan; Harakatul Jihad-e Islami; Lashkar-e Jhangvi; Muqami Tehrik-e Taliban; Punjabi Taliban; Lashkar-e Taiba; Jaish-e Mohammad; Al-Badr; and Harakatul Mujahideen-e al Alami. The sectarian ones include Jundallah Sepah-e Sahaba Pakistan; Sunni Tehrik; Sepah-e Mohammad; Tehrik-e Jafria, Lashkar-e Jhangvi. Jundallah, the terrorist militant organization based in Pakistani Baluchistan that emerged in 2003, specifically targets the Islamic Republic of Iran and is engaged in terrorist activities in Iranian Baluchistan.⁵² Since 2010 it has been linking up with other militant religious groups inside Pakistan and abroad. Vitaly, all of these groups adhere to the reactionary, orthodox Deobandi Wahabbist ideology as justification for its violence against fellow Muslims, adherents to Shi'ism in particular, and the United State, NATO states, and Russia. Additionally, since the late 2000s there is an increasing tendency of these groups to overlap politically and ideologically and co-operate and co-ordinate their activities agendas. These groups view their militant mission as part of a Sunni global movement struggling against imperialist great powers, such as the USA and Russia, heretical Shias and threatening non-Muslim states, such as India and fighting for the spread of their interpretation of Islam (Deobandi-Wahabbist ideology) to other Muslim countries. This in particular is a threat to both Iran and Russia.

Today not one Pakistani region has not been and is not subject to this rising militancy. Three problems face the Pakistani state and thus Iran, Russia and the USA, and Iran: (1) Pakistan's weak operational capacity within the country in dealing with radical militant groups, both homegrown and foreign, such as al-Qaeda, and controlling its own borders; (2) institutional weakness and overlapping jurisdictions that are severely detrimental to the formation and execution of cohesive and unified anti-militant policies; (3) the Pakistani elite's inability and unwillingness to revise its security and international worldview that is focused on India and ideas of Islam that could lead to the weakening and exclusion of militant extremism in the country and Afghan Taliban. After all, Pakistan's current and growing prob-

⁵¹ Yusuf M., ed. *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge*. Washington D.C., 2014, p. 52.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

lems with militancy, both on a regional and global level, within its own country is rooted in more than three decades of failed national and international political and security policies; and (4) growing popular political, social, and economic dissatisfaction, itself also a consequence of a failing state, that feeds these militant groups. In sum, there is little doubt that for the foreseeable future Pakistan will not only be under threat itself, but its territory will continue to be used against regional and global targets.

Iraq

The other looming crisis is post–ISIS Iraq. The modern state of Iraq has faced the challenge of creating a national identity capable of generating popular loyalty to the state. So far the project of creating such an identity and corresponding governing and power structures has failed. Ethnic, religious, tribal and/or local identities continue to be hegemonic, even into the post–Saddam period. Two serious cleavages continue to exist, the Sunni–Shia sectarian divide and the Arab–Kurdish ethnic divide. They are long–standing and commonly known. The government of Nouri al–Maliki, the Shia prime minister (2006–2014) exacerbated tensions between these groups by choosing to follow exclusionary rather than inclusionary power politics that alienated Sunnis and the Kurds. He thus played a key role in the inability of the Iraqi state to deal with the emergence and spread of ISIS. Since 2014 the threat of a ISIS victory compounded by the violence and brutality that characterizes its rule has regulated temporarily these two cleavages into the background as the Iraqi state, along with the Sunni, Shia and Kurdish communities, attempts to eradicate the immediate threat posed by ISIS. However, once this threat has been effectively contained (the elimination of ISIS will take time and be contingent on future political developments in Iraq) of the crisis of post–ISIS Iraq could emerge from the background and plunge West Asia into a more dangerous and devastating crisis.

The long–standing and politically dangerous cleavages of Sunni–Shia and Arab–Kurd are compounded by the growing fissures within the Shia and Kurdish political communities that have the great possibility of breaking out in post–ISIS Iraq. The KRG president, Massud Barzani floated once again in July 2014 the idea of a referendum on Kurdish independence in the aftermath of the emergence of ISIS and its victories and subsequent Kurdish territorial expansion. The most important of these territorial gains was the city of Kirkuk. This city has sizeable Arab and Turkmen populations that are not prepared to live within a Kurdish dominated state. He then abandoned the idea by November 2014 in light of ISIS victories and advances toward Erbil, the capital of KRG. At the beginning of February 2016 he once again announced his intention to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence. In the middle of June 2016 this plan was repeated by his son, Masrour Barzani, the head of the KRG’s National Security Council. He stressed that the high level of distrust and acrimony between the main ethnic and religious groups constituting Iraq prevents them from living ‘under one roof... Federation hasn’t worked....’

The push by the Barzani family seems to be an attempt to lengthen the political life of Massud Barzani. He created a constitutional crisis in August 2015 when he

announced he would not abandon his post as president as required by the constitution. This crisis deepened in October 2015 when the five main Kurdish parties, the KDP, PUK, Gorran Movement, Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and Kurdistan Islamic Group held a ninth round of negotiations that failed to come to any agreement over the presidency. The problem was that the KDP, Barzani's party, continues to insist on Barzani remaining in office. The current parliamentary make-up has created the conditions for this paralysis. The PUK and these other parties hold 42 seats, while the KDP has 38. On 11 October 2015 the speaker of the KRG parliament, Yusef Mohammad Sadiq, was not allowed to enter the capital. Since that time the parliament has been suspended. Two days later the KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, the nephew of the president, removed four members of his cabinet who were from the Gorran movement and replaced them with KDP figures.

Simultaneously, the KRG is facing a growing and deepening economic crisis. Structural problems, poor planning and vast corruption have sapped the economic life of the KRG. Moreover, over the last two years government and civil service salaries have been reduced by up to 70% while the Barzani administration remains months behind in paying such salaries. This issue alone has created both a political and economic crisis for the KRG since in Iraqi Kurdistan 1.5 million people out of a population of some 5 million hold some form of civil service or government job. It is also estimated that some 400,000–500,000 of these positions are ghost jobs where people show up just to pick up the paycheck. Demonstrations focused on these pay reductions and state non-payment of these salaries have dogged the KRG. In September 2015 KDP offices in Sulaimani City and Halabja provinces were attacked. In October 2015 thousands of people demonstrated in Sulaimani City and several other cities against the KRG and specifically the KDP. They were demanding payment of their salaries and the resignation of Barzani. Local KDP buildings were also burned to the ground. It seems that Masoud Barzani is seeking to ensure his political survival 'by diverting attention away from domestic political and economic problems to a historically popular cause.'⁵³ Consequently, in the foreground of this economic crisis the Iraqi Kurdish political community and specifically the KRG face a deepening and polarizing political divide.

These repeated calls by Barzani will also inflame regional geo-political crises. Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Russia, Iran and the US are against the partition of Iraq fearing the consequences such a move would have for tensions and struggles within present-day Iraq and for the issue of Kurdish secessionist sentiments amongst the Kurds of Turkey, Syria and Iran. Moreover, the region's major players will not tolerate easily the idea of a Kurdish–Israeli alliance—after all only Israel supports the idea of Kurdish independence. If Barzani, taking advantage of the weak Iraqi state and ISIS-created chaos, attempts to hold a referendum and declare independence, not only will the Iraqi state face a crisis from which it might not be able to recover, but also local state actors will be forced to act to contain the chaos emerging from the weakening Iraqi state and to deal with the Kurdish

⁵³ Nashashibi S. *The National*, 9 February 2016.

issue. Under such circumstances Saudi–Iranian geo–political tensions, Israeli geo–politics, Turkey’s problems with the Kurdish issue, and the issue of Syria, amongst other issues, could come into play with unpredictable consequences.

Simultaneously, there is growing possibility, although small in comparison to that faced by the KRG, of a split within Iraq’s Shia political community. 2015 saw growing popular protests in Baghdad and other Shia–dominated cities which represented the first large–scale popular attack on the modus operandi of the Iraqi political system. They also expressed a tension ‘and an internal Shia division on two levels: first, on the relationship between the grassroots community and the Shia political elite and its associated centres of power, and second, on the relationship between these centres of power, resources, and influence, and the government’s political ideology and foreign relations.’⁵⁴ In short, rising economic and social discontent mixed with the belief that the political class, dominated by fellow Shia groups, is interested only in protecting and expanding their economic, political, and power interests is slowly creating the preconditions for some form of political–social explosion that could have devastating consequences. On a different level there is a seeming growing divide within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a large umbrella force under which are situated many militias and military groups who have been active in the struggle against ISIS. The rising tensions are focused on the political shape and direction of post–ISIS Iraq. That which is worrying for some political figures, such as the prime minister and even Muqtada Sadr, is the possibility that one of these two blocs or groups within the PMF will use this growing popular economic and political discontent and its protests in order to achieve their own political and ideological goals.

Iran, USA, Russia: Unlikely Tactical Partners?

In Iraq transition to durable inclusionary state and power structures will require the participation third–parties that can take a myriad of forms ranging from low–key facilitation to direct intervention when needed. Iran and the USA with a strong Russian presence can play this vital role. Without third–party participation the bitterness and distrust between the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds could combine with the vested interests of spoilers that are hostile to settlement or seek excessive political and economic power to destroy any chance of reconciliation and establishment of inclusionary state and power structures.

The growing precariousness of the sectarian and ethnic situation in Iraq and the necessity to act preemptively needs to be recognized by these three countries. A key is to avoid the danger of incrementalism which is a common method in conflict resolution. It focuses on a ‘step–by–step progress toward a final settlement that emphasizes gradual confidence building between the parties in conflict through a phased, sequenced process that tackles the relatively minor and less–contentious issues first.’⁵⁵ However, the danger is that incrementalism can also excessively prolong the process and avoid tackling the most important issues. As the process drags on pressure from below and high politics can pull the parties

⁵⁴ Al-Hasan H. Social Protest in Iraq and Reality of the Internal Shia Dispute // Ali Jazeera Centre for Studies, 30 August 2015.

⁵⁵ Bose S. Contested Lands. Cambridge, MA., 2007. P. 6-7.

back into conflict. Given the current and worsening situation in Iraq, Iran, the USA, and Russia as third-parties with the will to knock heads together when necessary need to ensure that the Iraqi parties in conflict resolve on a fast track the main issues associated with the establishment of inclusionary state and power structures for a unified Iraq. Time is not necessarily on the side of those trying to bring peace and stability to the country. The implementation of any agreed plan can take place over a period of time, but the forming of such a plan must be fast-tracked in order to prevent the slip into chaos that it now seemingly threatening.

The challenge facing Iran, Russia, and the USA in Pakistan is equally daunting, but differs in its essence. On the one hand, they will need to convince Pakistan through a mixture of incentives and pressure to abandon its support of Afghan Taliban and its policy of using such groups as a tool of foreign policy. This challenge is complicated given its link to the hostility between India and Pakistan and the unresolved issue of Kashmir. Another complicating factor is Saudi Arabia which views Pakistan as an important element in its geo-political and ideological confrontation with Iran. But, elite opinion in the USA and Russia to varying degrees is in opposition to Saudi activities in this region given their clear threat to US and Russian national interests. On the other hand, it is questionable whether Iran, Russia, and USA, collectively or individually, can address the causes of Pakistan's failing state. The Pakistani elite needs to take the decision to deal with its failing state that creates the conditions for the emergence and strengthening of militant groups, fails to control and eliminate them, and exercises little control over its own borders through which militant groups are acting and threatening the security of Pakistan's neighbors. Vitally, it should not be forgotten that many of these militant groups are not in opposition to the Pakistani state. In the meanwhile, Iran, Russia, and the USA, individually and collectively, when possible, need to co-operate tactically to limit the threats to the region and beyond that continue to emerge from Pakistan. If not, instability and chaos could very well spread through Central Asia to the borders of Russia, across the border into Iran, and even into China's Xinjiang province that is populated by the Uyghurs.

As stated at the beginning of this short piece, despite the geo-political and ideological tensions between Washington, Moscow, and Tehran, the managing of these two looming crises requires forms of implicit and explicit co-operation and co-ordination between them based on a tactical flexibility that regulates the intensity of their trilateral interactions in regard to Iraq and Pakistan. If even limited steps are not taken in this direction the fallout from political instability and state breakdown in Iraq and/or Pakistan will exercise a very negative influence on the situation throughout Greater West Asia and ultimately Russia, Europe and the USA.

Section II. Security Threats and Possibilities for Cooperation

Topic 4. Iranian and Russian Views on the Situation in the Middle East: How Do We See the Future of the Region?

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Iran–Russia relations have been developing at an unprecedented pace since the breakup of the Soviet Union and present a whole range of questions to the expert community. Specifically, there has been a heated debate among analysts about the nature of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in the Middle East moving forward. While some argue the emergence of a new regional alliance, citing Syria as an example, others emphasize the fragile character of the Russia–Iran dialogue and point to Russia’s growing ties with Israel.

Russian and Iranian Interests in the Middle East

There is a strong impetus for a rapprochement between the two states, driven by discussions of regional issues. By 2016, both Russia and Iran were compelled to significantly step up their activity in the Middle East. For Moscow, the move was brought on by two crucial factors: the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West to levels unseen since before the collapse of the Soviet Union; and the increased jihadist threat in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, with the threat, according to certain experts, likely to significantly disrupt stability in the post-Soviet space. In this context, it would have been inexcusably careless of the Russian leadership to continue to regard the Middle East as only marginally significant to defending its national interests (as was the case in 1991–2012). Therefore, in 2012–2016, in addition to Russia increasing its presence in the Middle East considerably, the priorities of Russian diplomacy in the region were also redefined. For the purposes of convenience, the objectives can be categorized in three groups:

- economic (counteracting the negative impact of sanctions and counter-sanctions on the Russian economy; securing a market share in the Middle East for a number of Russian companies; protecting the interests of Russian oil and gas corporations);
- political (preventing attempts to isolate Russia on the international level by maintaining dialogue with the major players in the Middle East; using the regional situation to influence the policies adopted by the United States and the European Union; promoting Russia’s vision of the future of the system of international relations);
- security (counteracting the threats to the stability and security of the post-Soviet space arising out of the region, including international terrorism, radical

Islam, the proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction and transnational crime).

The delicacy and complexity of the tasks facing Russia naturally call for the improvement of relations with Iran – one of the key forces in the Middle East.

By 2016, Tehran, in turn, found itself deeply implicated in Middle Eastern affairs. This involvement, however, was triggered by slightly different motives. On the one hand, its current actions in Syria and the Middle East have been generally dictated by long-established and, to a certain extent, traditional factors, such as: (1) the aim of the Islamic Republic of Iran to position itself as a leading regional power; (2) rivalry with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its partners; and (3) the ideological standoff between the United States and Israel. On the other hand, the general destabilization in the region following the Arab Spring, the more recent threat of losing Syria (Tehran's main ally in the region), as well as the rise of new adversaries in the Middle East (for example, ISIS), have significantly transformed the map of the Middle East that had been familiar to Tehran since 2003 (since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the U.S. forces). The changes pose a significant challenge to Tehran's plans to acquire and maintain the status of the leading power in the Middle East, causing Iran to interfere with increasing frequency in regional affairs.

Furthermore, the idea of building a leading regional power is a part of modern Iranian ideology and governs the country's foreign policy. Recently, the call to defend Iran's regional interests in the context of the country's ideological doctrine has even been brought to the front, gradually replacing the thesis of asserting the nation's right to independent nuclear research, which has lost its relevance. Specifically, Iranian right-wing parties came up with the concept of the Axis of Resistance that includes Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. According to them, each of these countries is the "main line of defence" of the Islamic Republic of Iran against the hostile designs of its adversaries in the region, which strive to undermine Iran's role in the Middle East.

The Core Principles of Russia–Iran Regional Cooperation

To achieve its goals, Tehran, like Moscow, needs outside support. This is the primary force driving the countries towards one another. Despite their differences in reasoning and ultimate goals, the Russian and Iranian political elites have similar views on a number of regional issues (primarily, on the need to preserve Syrian state institutions, the spread of the Islamist and terrorist threat, and counteracting political decisions of western countries that go against the interests of Moscow and Tehran). Additionally for Iran, the dialogue on regional problems creates a solid ideological and political basis for intensifying its ties with Russia. For 15 years, Tehran has been looking among global and regional powers for an ally whose ties it could use to block anti-Iranian plots devised by the United States. Russia has been traditionally considered the leading candidate for this counterbalancing role. Yet, for a long time, any attempt to secure the strategic support of Moscow on a long-term basis fell through. Even if Moscow did on occasion block

steps taken by the United States against Iran, its actions were dictated by the Kremlin's view on how this would affect Russian interests, rather than any partner obligations. Moreover, until 2012, Moscow repeatedly compromised good relations with Tehran in favour of improving its relations with the West: for instance, banning supplies of modern weapons, like the P-300 anti-missile system, to Iran.

Despite this, Iran continued to search for an issue that would lend a positive impetus to the development of the relations between the two countries on a long-term and permanent basis. The goal remained even after the six world powers and Iran reached an agreement on its nuclear programme in 2015, which should ultimately ease U.S.–Iran tensions in the longer run. Speeches delivered by the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei in September–December 2015 indicated that Iran's leadership was still distrustful of the United States and assumed the U.S.–Iran confrontation would continue. This implies that Iran's need for a counterbalancing weight remains unchanged as well. It is hardly a surprise, then, that a considerable part of Iran's political elite maintains that, despite a shift in Iran's external situation after the nuclear deal, its focus on Russia remains a top priority. Furthermore, they also expect cooperation between the two nations in the Middle East to become the driving force behind Moscow's long-term support of Iran.

For its part, Russia is also interested in using regional issues to strengthen relations with Iran. Ever since Iran resumed its efforts to resolve the nuclear issue in 2012, Moscow has been worried that Tehran may eventually estrange itself from Russia and shift focus to the West. The Russian government's attempts in 2012–2016 to rekindle relations with Iran have shown that economic cooperation alone cannot provide a sufficient foundation for the dialogue because of the limited cooperation base in the area. With that in mind, Moscow can only rely on common political interests in the region to keep Iran attached to Moscow.

At the same time, the governments of the two countries are at peace with the difference in the reasons for their actions in the Middle East, which is often emphasized by different Iranian officials. For instance, describing Russia–Iran regional cooperation, they stress that, although each country pursues its own interests, neither Russia nor Iran can protect them in the Middle East on their own.⁵⁶ The two countries have therefore entered a “marriage of convenience”, whereby Russia and Iran are trying to achieve their respective goals through combined efforts. Such an approach to regional cooperation enables them, albeit with certain difficulties, to identify common ground on certain points of interest, or at least work around sensitive issues. Specifically, Moscow and Tehran were able to temporarily overlook their disagreement on the future of Bashar al-Assad as President of Syria. Russia, for one, sees the resignation of the Syrian leader as a possibility in the longer term, while Iran for a long time insisted on granting him full immunity. By 2016, in a long series of negotiations, Tehran and Moscow found a temporary solution to the conflict, finally agreeing that Bashar al-Assad could be removed from his office only by an expression of the will of the people in a nationwide vote.

⁵⁶ See, for instance: Mehr. Velayati: Assad is Iran's Redline, 14 Azar 1394 (December 5, 2015).

The context of Iran's internal political situation means that the most vocal on the need to cooperate with Russia in the Middle East are the representatives of the conservative wing of Iran's political establishment. However, different political groups in Iran have reached a general consensus on regional cooperation with Moscow. This is confirmed by a litmus test of the Iranian media reflecting public and political trends, which, their political affiliation notwithstanding, agree that cooperation between Moscow and Tehran is needed. Where they differ is in the justification for this cooperation. For instance, while media holdings that support the government and the conservative forces (such as the FARS news agency, the Islamic Republic News Agency and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) tend to celebrate the Russia–Iran presence in the region, moderate and reformist publications (such as *Mardom Salari*, *Arman* and *Iran*) are more cautious, reminding their readers that Russia cooperates with Tehran for purely pragmatic reasons, and is far from being a sincere ally.

Iran's Views on Developments in Syria and Russia's Role in the Country

Ever since Russia launched its aerospace defence operation in Syria, the perception of the Russia–Iran dialogue on regional matters has grown more positive in Tehran. This is reflected in the activities of the Islamic Parliament Research Center (IPRC), which drafted two reports in the space of two months. The first, which was published on September 29, 2015, dealt explicitly with the reasons for Russia's increased military presence in Syria, while the second, published on November 29, 2015, discussed the reasons for the downing of the Russian Su–24 aircraft.⁵⁷ Despite the short period of time between the two reports, their rhetoric and language are surprisingly different.

In the first report, though drafted in neutral to positive language, the conclusions drawn to a large extent contradicted the official view of the Russian government. Specifically, the authors discerned that the statement that Moscow was compelled to launch military intervention in the Syrian conflict because of the imminent spread of radical Islamism throughout the post–Soviet space (the main reason for its actions in the Syria, as cited by the Kremlin), was no more than just one (and, apparently, not even the most important) factor that prompted the Russian government to deploy its aerospace defence forces at an airbase in Latakia. Instead, the report focuses on Moscow's desire to maintain and expand its influence in the Middle East, and its anti–Western tendencies serve as the driving force behind Russia's foreign policy in Syria, the assumption being that Russia intervened in Syria to “rectify” the mistakes committed by western countries and protect the “anti–Western” regime of Bashar al–Assad. The conclusions presented in the report are similarly unambiguous: according to the authors, in the existing conditions, Moscow's military intervention was equally likely to benefit and hurt Iran.

The report published two months later is almost a direct opposite of the first one,

⁵⁷ Majlis Research Center, The causes and driving forces of the Russian assistance to the legal Syrian government // Weekly Political Studies, No. 132, 7 Mehr 1394 (30.10.2015); Majlis Research Center, The tension in Russian-Turkish relations: Causes and Consequences // Weekly Political Studies, No 136, 8 Azar 1394 (30.11.2015) (both in Persian).

with the authors unequivocally articulating the official Moscow view on the downing of the Su–24 in particular, and on developments in Syria in general. It should be noted that reiterating Moscow’s official stance on the Syrian crisis has become quite common among the Iranian expert community and within the media. Furthermore, the major Iranian news agencies, including the Islamic Republic News Agency, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and FARS, voice the opinions of Russian officials on the crisis in Syria almost as often as statements by their Iranian counterparts.

Syria occupies a central place in the discussion of Russia–Iran regional cooperation, and not only because the two countries are deeply involved in the conflict unfolding in that country. Syria is also a glaring example of the abovementioned “Russia–Iran marriage of convenience”: while their reasons for their respective de facto military involvement in Syria may differ, this does not prevent a certain level of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. For instance, Syria has remained a strategic partner of Iran in the Arab world. Up until the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Tehran and Damascus maintained close and trust–based relations which, in general, progressed without any problems. The Iranian side welcomed Syria’s stance on regional matters, emphasizing that it was up to Tehran and Damascus, as two “brotherly” nations “with a special view on Middle Eastern affairs” to play the key role in counteracting the efforts of the United States and Israel in the Middle East (primarily, in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq). Tehran and Damascus also used to align their positions on the Kurdish issue on a regular basis. Bilateral meetings were conducted on a tight schedule. All things considered, the loss of an ally such as Damascus would significantly weaken Tehran’s positions in the Middle East. Furthermore, it is currently the official position of the office of the Supreme Leader of Iran that military presence in Syria constitutes an important element of the country’s standoff with its major opponents in the region: Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia. All this makes the preservation of a pro–Iranian regime in Syria a vital task for Tehran.

In turn, Russia’s leadership was prompted to interfere in the conflict by the certainty they felt that the rise of radical Islamism in Syria and Iraq posed a considerable security threat to Russia and the CIS. As far as Moscow is concerned, the only way to mitigate the threat is to preserve the current regime in Syria as the last remaining guarantee that the country will not slide into complete chaos and spill new waves of jihadi terrorists to the Middle East and beyond. When it became obvious by the summer of 2015 that it was only a matter of time before the current regime would fall, the Russian leadership resolved to start preparations for a military operation in Syria. As a consequence, Moscow became a natural partner of Tehran in the struggle to preserve Syria’s statehood.

Russia and Iran formed a relatively effective team in Syria, with each complementing the other. For instance, the Iranian government provides financial and material aid and (most importantly) manpower: Tehran made sure that it was not just regular units of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution and Iranian volunteers that were fighting for the regime, but also Lebanese Hezbollah troops and volunteers from across the whole region – Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. In turn, Russia

supplies air support, artillery and heavy vehicles, the lack of which would render Iranian assistance useless on the battlefield. Moscow has also shared in the burden of financial and technical support of the regime with Iran. With ad hoc coordination in the field, the nations also interact on the diplomatic level.

Russia–Iran Cooperation and Regional Players

Nevertheless, it would be premature to describe the regional cooperation between Russia and Iran as an “alliance,” even regarding Syria. First and foremost, the two nations lack the most important distinctive feature of allies: joint headquarters or any other supranational authority responsible for the permanent and continuous coordination of efforts. The information centre in Baghdad cannot be regarded as such; it is essentially an information channel allowing the parties to communicate. Generally, ad hoc cooperation, and no more than just that, is in place instead of close coordination. Essentially, Iran and Russia have been following parallel courses in Syria, while acting independently in the Middle East as a whole, exercising a certain degree of caution to avoid irritating their counterparts.

The lack of an actual alliance between Russia and Iran is largely the consequence of the very nature of cooperation between Russia and Iran, which is built on forced interactions coupled with expressly divergent strategies. The latter is also the constraining factor for rapprochement between Russia and Iran on a whole range of regional matters in general. In other words, while the pragmatic approach to the Russia–Iran dialogue allows sensitive issues to be smoothed over, it does nothing to resolve them.

First of all, Moscow and Tehran use different conceptual approaches to outline their regional strategies. For one, Russia is drawing on the principle of balanced relations with the Middle East nations while they continue to show even the smallest degree of interest in the dialogue. Tehran, on the other hand, claims the role of regional leader, which causes it to clearly define its preferences in terms of friends and foes. In this context, Russia is sometimes forced to disown some of Tehran’s moves to stay away from unnecessary conflicts and confrontations. Specifically, the Russian government is particularly reluctant to have anything to do with the Sunni–Shia confrontation that is unfolding in the Middle East, whereas Tehran is logically slated to protect Shia interests. This inevitably puts them in confrontation with other regional leaders – Saudi Arabia and its partners from the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC). Seen in this light, Moscow’s partnership with the overwhelmingly Shia Iran would become a trump card in the hands of those wishing to make Russia look as the enemy of all Sunni Muslims. This can be used to not only weaken Moscow’s stance in the Middle East, but also to destabilize Russia’s predominantly Muslim regions.

Much has been said by Russian and western experts about the plans of the Russian leadership to further expand relations with the GCC member states, both within and outside Russia, as well as ways in which interaction with Tehran could ham-

per these plans in the current situation.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, another aspect deserves a special mention: if Moscow takes Tehran's side in the Iran–GCC standoff, it may just take the hardest hit in the end. This can actually be explained by the fact that current Iran–GCC tensions are neither new nor unique. Traditionally, their relations follow a sinusoidal pattern, with periods of confrontations (not always successfully) replaced by attempts to find common ground and coexist peacefully. Specifically, the most recent thaw in relations between the GCC (particularly the smaller Arab monarchies) and Iran was observed in the mid- to late 2000s, when Tehran made a number of steps to improve diplomatic relations with all its Persian Gulf neighbours, as well as to establish economic and energy cooperation. In some instances, the latter was done to the detriment of Russian interests: for example, in 2008, the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad government backed out of previous agreements with Moscow and supported Doha's bid to become headquarters of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), although had previously agreed to vote for St. Petersburg. This was done in order to please Qatar and considerably improve relations with that country.

It is also worth remembering that in the 2010s, the governments of the United Arab Emirates and Oman were known to occasionally turn a blind eye to Iran's actions on their territories to bypass international sanctions. Furthermore, according to some sources, the government of Oman also acted as an unofficial mediator between the United States and Iran, helping them to launch an informal dialogue to prepare for official P5+1 talks. This said, the status of Iran–GCC relations is conditional upon the current developments in the region, as well as on the irrational fears of the governments of Arab monarchies, which are prone to blame all their political failures in the Middle East on Tehran and deliver disproportionate responses. Iran, however, takes a pragmatic approach to its relations with the GCC nations and, despite the occasional outbursts from the Arab states, notifies them of its being open to negotiations. Given the circumstances, Moscow may find itself alone in opposition to Persian Gulf monarchies if Tehran seizes the moment to bury the hatchet with its opponents.

The Russian leadership appears to be well aware of the likelihood of such a scenario. Therefore, Moscow does its best to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the GCC nations at all times. Despite numerous disagreements, Russia hosted a regular meeting of the GCC ministers of foreign affairs in May 2016. Furthermore, in the final statement, Moscow even backed the motion to resolve the territorial disputes between Iran and the United Arab Emirates at the level of the United Nation (which Tehran opposes).

The Russia–Iranian Dialogue and the Israel Factor

Ties with Israel and Palestine are yet another sensitive issue in Russia–Iran relations. In this respect, Iran's position has remained unchanged for almost 30 years, with Israel still regarded as the country's key opponent in the region, while the removal of the "Zionist regime" is occasionally referred to in Tehran as the only

⁵⁸ See, for instance: Suchkov M. Why Russia's Mideast Agenda doesn't Appeal to GCC // *Al-Monitor*, June 11, 2015. URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/russia-middle-east-agenda-gcc.html>

possible solution to the Palestine–Israel issue amid calls to end the occupation of Arab lands, repatriate refugees and let the Palestinian people determine their own future by way of a referendum. In de facto opposition of the two–state solution, Iran has taken a very guarded approach to the Middle East quartet of international mediators (Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations) and is openly pessimistic about the prospects of any of their initiatives, cautioning against the United States monopolizing the peace process.

Predictably, Russia has a different view on the issue. Having consistently supported the two–state solution to the Palestine–Israel issue, Moscow has been strengthening ties with Tel Aviv in the meantime. Experts have even mentioned good personal relations between Russian and Israeli leaders, citing a joint address to the Jews in Russia and abroad by Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu congratulating them on Pesach (Passover) during the Israeli Prime Minister’s visit to Moscow in April 2016 as a glaring (and unparalleled in the history of Russia–Israel relations) example. It is against this background that Moscow assured Tel Aviv that any action it might take in the Middle East would not harm Israel. As a result, any attempt by Iran to launch an act of aggression against Israel is likely to elicit a very negative response in the Kremlin.

Prospects of Russia–Iran Regional Cooperation

The cases with Israel and the GCC are the most conclusive proof of existing limitations in the Russia–Iran dialogue in certain areas of regional affairs. However, the list is by no means exhaustive. There is also place for disagreements and apprehensiveness in the countries’ positions on Iraq and Turkey, as well as the issue of regional pipelines. For instance, in Iraq, Russia stays away from the country’s domestic affairs, while Tehran’s policy is one of the driving factors behind Iraqi internal affairs. The fight against ISIS (an organization that is banned in Russia) in the neighbouring Iraqi provinces presents another example: while the Iranian government is actively involved in the armed standoff, Moscow obviously classifies the threat level in Baghdad as below that of Damascus and limits the support it gives to the local government to vehicle deliveries and information sharing.

In the economic sphere, Russia and Iran may oppose regional energy projects that are equally unacceptable for Moscow and Tehran (for example, the Trans–Caspian Gas Pipeline project, TCP). Yet, the situation changes if one of the parties benefits from any particular project. For instance, Iran is a staunch opponent of the TCP and has repeatedly expressed willingness to support projects similar to the Nabucco–West pipeline and establish natural gas supplies to the European Union, which would make Europe far less dependent on Russian “blue fuel”. Although Tehran is unlikely to be presented with a chance to enter the European gas market anytime soon, such statements from Tehran can hardly be described as friendly or in keeping with an alliance relationship.

Considering the differences in the motives for the actions of Russia and Iran in the Middle East mentioned above, a permanent and effective alliance between the two countries can hardly be expected (except in case of an extraordinary event that would drastically change the tactics of the two countries). Meanwhile, shared

approaches to a number of problems guarantee that the Moscow–Tehran dialogue will continue to get stronger in the near future, translating into more ad hoc cooperation. Still, the essential difference in international standing between Russia and Iran is also a factor. While Russia claims to be a key international player, its Middle Eastern policy is, while certainly important, only a part of the global game pursued by Moscow. For Iran, with its status of a regional power, the Middle East is a top priority, which warrants much more active involvement in regional events on the part of Tehran (for instance, in Yemen and Iraq). For Moscow, involvement to such a degree is not always justified and necessary. As a result, the closest cooperation can be seen in Syria, where involvement is fairly high on both sides. By contrast, in Iraq, where Moscow’s involvement is restricted to the supply of weapons, the intensity of the Russia–Iran dialogue is low.

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There is no doubt that the Islamic Republic of Iran has been not only the closest Middle Eastern state to Russia, but also the most stable and durable one working with Kremlin in the region during the last two and half decades. Despite many ups and downs, Tehran–Moscow ties have been special and strategic for both states during most of the post–Soviet era. Nonetheless, Iranian–Russian cooperation has not become active in the entire Middle East for various reasons, despite some common regional approaches between the two neighboring states, namely opposition to US military involvement in the Middle East. Joint work to cope with the Syrian crisis is indeed a new task both Iran and post–Soviet Russia have taken on. Before the Syrian civil war, Iran and Russia worked together on resolving the Tajik Civil War and to some extent the crisis in Afghanistan in the 2000s, but the recent bilateral collaboration of Tehran and Moscow in regard to the Syrian crisis has distinct significance and features. None of the previous collaborative attempts between Iran and Russia were not alarming to other regional and extra–regional powers. More importantly, while decisive in the stability of the Middle East, Tehran–Moscow regional cooperation would not propose a new definition for “regional order”. Unlike the case of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the Iranian–Russian cooperation in regard to the Syrian crisis would perform a pivotal role in forging future security order of the Middle East – or it could do so at last. In this context, the article sets about addressing the questions of possible outlooks for the Iranian–Russian maintenance of cooperation in the Middle East and the likelihood of turning such cooperation into a foundation for a new regional order.

Middle East and the Order

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks for researchers in the field of international relations is arriving at a definition of order in the Middle East. The fact that the Middle East is a mental or discursive construct makes it difficult and challenging to define its boundaries and identify the elements, actors, and rules that form this concept. As a discursive construct, the Middle East has had different nodal points at different times, from the geopolitical competition among European great powers at the beginning of the twentieth century to the issue of energy and simultaneously Arab nationalism and the Arab–Israeli conflict in the post–World War II era. During the final two decades of the twentieth century, Islamism was added to the various issues of the Middle East, and the region has since witnessed different issues, from weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) to terrorism, and from Arab revolutions to religious extremism. The Middle East does not match Buzan and Waever’s definition of security complexes, nor can it be defined or explained by theories of integration and divergence. Even the concept of regionalism, which explained many regional trends and processes in many regions of the world in the post–Cold War era, is not applicable to this region. For some analysts, the Middle East is “a region with regionalism”; for some others The Middle East presents an interesting anti–case for the analysis of regionalism. That is to say, there are several reasons why the Middle East is an anti–case with regard to regionalism, including divergence of national interests, the involvement of global powers in regional affairs, the Arab–Israeli conflict and the role of “political Islam”.

There is yet no consensus regarding what elements we need to consider if we want to comprehend the logic of the developments in the Middle East. From a realistic point of view, explaining the balance of power among the major actors in the region and, above all, the policy of the great powers clarifies the disputes and coalitions in the region to a certain extent. However, the problem with realistic approaches is that they are overly state-centered and power-centered and are, therefore, unable to capture social trends. Power issues in the Middle East cannot be analyzed or explained without considering social and discursive developments. For more than several decades, great powers, including the US, Europe, and the USSR/Russia, have been trying to bring the issue of Arab–Israeli peace to a conclusion. Nevertheless, the issue has never been fully resolved and has kept coming back to the fore from time to time. Similarly, the issue of Islamic resurgence, revived by Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, keeps reproducing itself in various forms and micro-discourses despite opposition from great powers. The anti-dictatorship and freedom-seeking discourse, too, has retained its vitality in the region over the past century and has triggered new developments in the region at different points in time. The developments in the Arab World known as the Arab spring (2010–2011) are indeed the latest product of the freedom-seeking discourse in the region.

Perhaps it was once great powers that determined the fate of the Middle East, but now discursive conflicts and the competition among regional powers influence the geographical area of West Asia and North Africa. Moreover, subnational and supranational non-state actors in the region such as the Kurds, Daesh (ISIL), Lebanon’s Hezbollah, and many other groups have gained a significant role in determining the course of regional developments.

The Syrian crisis, since its beginning five years ago, has influenced the security order in the Middle East while Syria has in practice turned into a collision point for the opposing discourses in the region and the interests of various actors. Therefore, many analysts believe that the future order in the region will be determined by how the Syrian crisis will be settled. One important issue in the Syrian crisis that can influence the management of the crisis and the future of regional order is the alliances and coalitions shaped within the crisis. The key point regarding the nature of the coalitions in the Syrian crisis is that although five years have passed since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and many local, regional, and extra-regional actors have been involved in it, no full-fledged coalition has yet been formed among the different actors. What has happened so far is in reality cooperation among some major actors in the crisis. So far, we have seen cooperation between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and between Turkey and the United States on one side and cooperation between Iran and Russia on the other side. The only coalition in the region is the one between Saudi Arabia and some countries supporting Riyadh on the Yemen war, but that is not a full-fledged coalition either. There are many commonalities among the goals and interests of the actors on either side. However, regional and international circumstances such as the fluidity of the Syrian crisis and the existence of some tactical and even strategic differences, ambiguities, and disagreements have prevented the actors on either side to be fully linked to one

another. Under these circumstances, all the actors try not to align fully with one another. The US, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are not fully aligned with one another in this crisis and, likewise, there is no full alignment between Iran and Russia.

In addition, given the constant changes in the circumstances and dimensions of the crisis, the distance between expectations (the ideal situation) and realities (the existing situation) for all the actors involved in the crisis has constantly been changing over the past years. These changes have, in turn, caused some of the actors to adjust their expectations or change their behavior. The situation of Turkey in the crisis up to now illustrates this point. These changes can also mean that there will probably be more changes in the coalitions and behavior of the actors in the future.

Besides the major actors in the Syrian crisis, there are also some minor actors (e.g. European powers, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, and Egypt) which are not heavy weights in the crisis equations but whose behavior can nevertheless influence the course of the crisis under certain circumstances. Iraq is the only actor in the crisis that has tactical and strategic interactions with the US and the European powers (and to a lesser extent Turkey) on one side and with Iran, Russia, and the government of Bashar al-Assad on the other side. Therefore, the tilting of Iraq towards one side can have a decisive role in the crisis. Further, Iraq can serve as the link between some opposing actors.

Iranian–Russian Cooperation on the Syria’s Crisis

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the closest Middle East country to Russia over the past quarter-century, Iranian–Russian cooperation in the Middle East was not significant before the Syrian crisis. Common interests of Iran and Russia before the crisis were restricted to bilateral or international issues, such as common opposition to unilateralism of the US. The Syrian crisis operationally put Iran and Russia on the same front in the Middle East for the first time. Hence, the Syrian crisis not only can affect the future security order of the Middle East and standing of Iran and Russia in this region but also will probably play a decisive role in the level of Iranian–Russian cooperation in other areas. If both states have successful experience in managing the crisis in Syria, that can also be used in some other areas. Currently, without a comprehensive military alliance in Syria, Tehran and Moscow have managed to advance their policies and goals through shared responsibilities in the embattled Syria. During one year of Russian military involvement in Syria, although Iran has tried not to become Russia’s ground force and Russia has attempted to avoid playing the role of Iran’s air force, the two neighboring states collaboratively have managed to prevent the Syrian Oppositions from achieving their goals in Syria. Although Iran and Russia have pursued a single goal in Syria so far and are seemingly at the same side, the reality is that both countries have fought in their own sides through a clever division of duties. Neither Iran nor Russia are fighting in each other’s side in Syria. However, as long as the agenda of both sides in Syria has not changed, it can be expected that this cooperation can continue based on division of duties and shared responsibilities in a way that ensures the objectives

of the both involving states. In the case of any change in the agenda of either of Tehran or Moscow, conditions can completely change. In other words, the possibility of more or less equal division of labor between Iran and Russia in Syria is not the same under any circumstances. If Russia wants to make a shift from military operation to diplomatic efforts, Russia can practically take control over the management of this crisis and there will be fewer opportunities for division of duties as a way of cooperation between the two sides. If it is realistically understood that neither Iran nor Russia are willing to accept a hundred percent Russian or Iranian solution to Syria crisis, then division of duties is the best way for cooperation between Tehran and Moscow. Regarding the future of the Syrian crisis, Vitaly Namkin, former director of the Institute of Oriental Studies at Russian Academy of Sciences and senior Russian expert, turns attention to three possible scenarios for the war-torn Syria:

- gradual national reconciliation through the Geneva dialogue,
- a military victory by President Bashar al-Assad, or
- a major war involving global powers.

According to his analysis, “Russia, like most global and regional powers, continues to support a political solution to the Syrian crisis based on the June 2012 Geneva communique and agreements reached in 2015 by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in Vienna.”⁵⁹

The Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly announced its support for political solutions to end the crisis in Syria. However, the problem is that the Iranian leadership may not be as optimistic as the Russian leaders about fairness and impartiality of solutions or agreements in which the US is one of the parties. By contrast, it seems that Kremlin not only hopes to achieve an agreement with the US on the Syrian crisis but also believes that such an agreement is the only possible way in this context. In an article published by Foreign Affairs, Fyodor Lukyanov, chair of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, wrote “when an acute international crisis breaks out, Russia and the United States are often the only actors able to resolve it.”⁶⁰

According to Iranian analysts, Russia seeks great achievements in the Middle East with limited capital and a more limited investment. This increases the risk of Russia’s behavior for all major players in the Middle East, including Iran. In addition, Russia tries to settle its conflicts with the West or at least push them to the margin through the Syria crisis. In diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria, Russia is greatly hoping for association and cooperation with the US.

Despite the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran on the Syria’s crisis and its possible impact on the future of the region, there is no doubt that issues, concerns, and approaches of these states to developments and role of other actors in the region are different. Future ties between Iran and Russia in the

⁵⁹ Naumkin V. What’s next for Syria? // *Al-monitor*. 2 February 2016.

URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/02/syria-national-reconciliation-military-war-russia-geneva.html>

⁶⁰ Lukyanov F. Putin’s Foreign Policy // *Foreign Affairs*. 2016. Vol. 95, No. 3.

Middle East depend on the way these differences are dealt with and achievements obtained from direct or indirect cooperation between Tehran and Moscow.

Since day one, it was clear Russia and Iran have pursued different objectives of entering the military operations in Syria. Maintaining the Islamic resistance front by supporting Assad's regime has been considered the main goal for Iran, while Russia has sought to protect Assad in order to persuade other parties to accept its share to the future government. Therefore, military intervention for Russia has been basically a means to achieve political and diplomatic ends. This is why the Russians have proposed several plans for diplomatic settlement of the Syrian crisis as soon as the conditions were ready. In this regard, Russia has managed to take two successful major steps: first, initiating direct talks between all involved parties, and second, establishing a ceasefire between the negotiating parties. In the third step, Russia seeks to provide a plan for running the post-crisis Syria. Development of the draft of the new constitution of Syria and proposals on federalization of this country are two examples of Moscow's attempts. It is still unknown to what extent these plans will be operational with the approval of other parties, but it is obvious if Russia cannot maintain its influence in Syria and at least in western parts of the embattled country including Damascus, Lattakia, Tartus, and the Syrian coasts in the Mediterranean Sea, this country will virtually have not obtained any benefit from its military actions in Syria. From a minimalist perspective, the plan for the federalization of Syria may also be a good option for Iran. However, from the Iranian perspective, a practically dissolved Syria cannot be expected to be a strong link in the chain of resistance against Israel.

Additionally, although these plans may be considered by Russia a good foundation for the future of Syria, they cannot address the fundamental problem of Syria and the whole region, namely the presence of extremist groups and movements. In fact, the specific plan of the Kremlin for dealing with extremist movements includes restriction on foreign support for them in the first step and establishment of an international coalition against them. Iran is not optimistic about these moves. Tehran is not sure that the US is really looking for eradication of extremism in this region.

Another important point about Iranian–Russian cooperation in regard to the Syrian crisis is that while Russia greatly required the cooperation and support of Iran at the beginning of the coalition, this need may reduce in the future. In other words, despite the fact that the active participation of Russia in the Syrian crisis has been accomplished with the assistance and cooperation of Iran, Moscow may think about interaction with parties other than Iran in the future. In an exclusive interview with The Institute for Iran–Eurasia Studies (IRAS), Vladimir Evseev, director of the Center for Public Policy Research in Academic Secretary of the Coordinating Council of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) on forecasting, pointed out “Russia's role in Syria will boost, while Iran's may not.”

Disparities in Approaches to the Middle East

In addition to issues that are related to the future of Syria, there are some other themes Iranian analysts believe to be major obstacles in the way of promoting

cooperation between Iran and Russia from a strategic cooperation to the level of a strategic partnership in the Middle East. Some of these themes that are the understanding of mainly Iranian analysts about Russia's approach to the Middle East:

- *Israel*. The slogan of the destruction of Israel posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran does not comply with Russian policies and the Kremlin is seriously against any Iranian threats against Israel.
- *Russia's opposition to superiority of a regional power*. Considering the approach of Russia, Moscow by no means to violate the balance of power between states in the Middle East and also are against a country having comparative superiority to other countries.
- *Russia's hesitations about Iran's optimal plan for the region*. Russia looks suspiciously at the ideological approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the world and the region. Despite alignment with the negative aspect of Iran's approach (opposition to US unilateralism), it is not in agreement with the positive aspect (Creating a fair system based on power equality of states in the region).
- *Difference in the approach to confront the USA in the region*. Despite Russia's opposition to US military involvement in the Middle East, they have not shown any permanent and/or official opposition to it. In short, they do not seem overly concerned by this presence since the beginning of the Syrian crisis. Concomitantly, the Islamic Republic of Iran considers US military presence in the region as a real and direct threat to its national security
- *Russia's unwillingness to join regional alliances*. Despite Russia's close ties with Iran, Moscow is not interested in being linked in an alliance with Iran in the region, which it considers an impediment to Moscow's relations with other regional powers.

Future Outlook

While Iran and Russia may be far from achieving a strategic partnership to design a new security model in the Middle East, a couple of issues should be noted:

The situation in West Asia and North Africa is so complex that there is no hope for Iran, Russia or any other power to be in a position of reconstructing a new order in the short term. Therefore, as long as there are common threats, common solutions to deal with these threats must be considered. Moreover, the discussion over disputed cases should be assigned to the appropriate time.

In the case of the Syrian crisis, Russia's plans have advanced well so far. But it still does not seem a good time to judge the success of Russia, and on the other hand the desirability of its success for Iran.

Russia has not been a disciplinary power in the Middle East and they have not even sought balancing against the West after the collapse of Soviet Union. Russia is reluctant to alter the balance and counts Iran as an actor along with other actors

in this framework. In other words, Russia's plan for the Middle East has not been designed based on comprehensive cooperation with Iran. Indeed, the record of cooperation of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Russia as well as strategic alignment between the two states at the international level enjoys the highest potentials for continuation of the strategic partnership with Russia in the Middle East. Accordingly, it seems that in any plan for strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran in the Middle East, the following should be considered:

West Asia and North Africa, commonly known in the Western interpretation as The Middle East, is a region where effective and stable presence in it is not possible by using mere a state-centered and power-driven realist approach. However, having hardware or diplomatic power is an effective factor to impact the developments in the Middle East, but persuasive discourses along with social legitimacy should be noted more than any other points in the process of regional changes. The Islamic Republic of Iran possesses discursive power as well as political and cultural influence in the region and Russia is in possession of military and diplomatic power. The combination of these two powers can help to create stability in the Middle East.

Given the fact that neither Iran, nor Russia are willing to be under each other's name in the Middle East, the formed pattern of division of duties between Iran and Russia in the Syrian crisis can be applied in the Middle East.

The Islamic Republic of Iran while having an independent foreign policy is the only state on which Russia can maintain its influence in the Middle East through cooperation or, in better terms, a division of labor with Iran.

While it is necessary to cooperate with the West in order to manage the Syrian crisis, the West will not allow Moscow to turn the Middle East into its sphere of influence.

While in the short term, having being "market oriented" in the Middle East along with trying to take advantage of all possible opportunities might be in Russia's interest, it will not, from a long term perspective, turn Moscow into a responsible power and reliable partner in the opinion of region's states.

Topic 5. Common Security Challenges and Prospects for Cooperation

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Summary

Due to a variety of reasons, up until recently, Russia–Iran relations were difficult due to the lack of mutual trust and against the background of serious pressure from western countries. Nonetheless, Moscow and Tehran face common security challenges, which, even given their partially divergent national interests, could not prevent Russia and Iran from moving toward a strategic partnership. Iran joining the SCO as a full-fledged member and establishing partnership with the CSTO Secretariat could be of help in that regard.

Russia–Iran relations have been anything but smooth over the past few decades, the product of diverging national interests and a lack of mutual trust in conditions of serious pressure from the United States. Thus, in June 1995, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Viktor Chernomyrdin and Vice President of the United States Al Gore signed a secret protocol which led to the complete termination of military technical cooperation between Moscow and Tehran by the late 1990s⁶¹.

On the other hand, Russia was concerned with Iran's intense confrontation with the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which was clearly demonstrated during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. Consequently, Moscow assumed an overall positive stance regarding the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, since Rouhani called for both regional and global dialogue. As a result, on July 14, 2015, representatives of Iran and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) approved the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which set in motion the process of gradually lifting both international and unilateral financial and economic sanctions. It was against this background that the strategic dialogue between Russia and Iran expanded significantly, prompted by common security challenges.

Common Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Challenges

The main traditional security challenges, according to Iran, are as follows (in descending order of priority):

- The continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and several other states in the Middle East⁶², as well as in Turkey;

Iran understands all too well that the deployed military infrastructure allows the United States to project its power onto the territory of states whose interests do

⁶¹ Why Russia Decided the Sell S-300s to Iran // The Russian Spring. Moscow, April 14, 2015.
URL: http://www.rusvesna.ru/editorial_column/1428981471 (in Russian).

⁶² Ebadi A. Eight Key Military Bases of the United States Against which Iran Could Launch a Strike // FARS Information Agency. Tehran, June 11, 2015.
URL: <http://www.inosmi.ru/world/20150611/228512342.html> (in Russian, translated from the original Persian).

not coincide with its own. This is precisely what happened in 2003 when Saddam Hussein was overthrown in Iraq.

- Israel's intelligence gathering activities in Iran;

A large number of Israel's intelligence gathering technical equipment (both ground-based and drones) is deployed in Azerbaijan, close to the Iranian border⁶³.

- Israel's regular missile strikes against and bombings of vehicle convoys (used as storage facilities) of Iranian cargo sent to the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, the Palestinian HAMAS and Islamic Jihad;

In particular, on February 18, 2016, the Israeli Air Force launched three missiles at the target on the highway from Damascus to the city of Daraa. They also attacked weapons storehouses around Tel Man that were most likely owned by the Lebanese Hezbollah. In October 2015, Israel bombed facilities in the Qalamoun Mountains close to the Syria–Lebanon border⁶⁴.

- The continuing proxy war with Saudi Arabia in Iraq and Syria (less clearly manifested in Yemen, Lebanon and Afghanistan);

This war is being waged, on the one hand, by armed units of Sunni Arabs and mercenaries fully financed by Saudi Arabia. In Iraq and Syria, they are opposed by national armies and various militias composed mostly of Shia Arabs (Alawites, Christians, Yazidis and the Druze) whom Iran actively supports. As a result, the armed hostilities often taken on the nature of a Sunni–Shia confrontation.

- The continuing conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Nagorno–Karabakh, as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestine. These confrontations are a threat to Iran, as war could spill onto its territory from Iraq or Afghanistan and Iran could lose influence in the Middle East (the South Caucasus), which would hinder Tehran in terms of realizing its regional ambitions.

Among non-traditional security challenges, Iran pays particular attention to separatism, Islamic extremism, drug trafficking and illegal trade in weapons and munitions, illegal migration, and also various manifestations of transnational crime. The problem of separatism is viewed as the greatest priority due to the desire for independence among Iranian Kurds, the Baloch and Arabs. This problem is exacerbated by the de facto independent Iraqi Kurdistan and the corresponding statements of the Syrian Kurds.

As Russia returns to the Middle East, it does not strive for regional leadership or to push the United States out of the region. Russia is more concerned with the fact that the “power vacuum in some countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa obviously resulted in the emergence of areas of anarchy, which were

⁶³ Georgiev V. Azerbaijan's Anti-Iranian Strategy // Iran.Ru Russian Information Agency. Moscow, March 14, 2012. URL: http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/78978/Antiiranskaya_strategiya_Azerbaydzhana (in Russian).

⁶⁴ Reuters: Israel Launches Missile Strike South of Damascus // News in Israel. Tel Aviv, February 18, 2016. URL: <http://news.israelinfo.co.il/world/60581> (in Russian).

quickly filled with extremists and terrorists.” As Vladimir Putin said, speaking at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, “it is hypocritical and irresponsible to make declarations about the threat of terrorism and at the same time turn a blind eye to the channels used to finance and support terrorists, including revenues from drug trafficking, the illegal oil trade and the arms trade”⁶⁵. Consequently, Russia’s traditional security challenges could be ranked in the following order of priority:

- Unresolved armed conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Nagorno–Karabakh, Iraq and Yemen, as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestine;
All these conflicts are fairly distant from Russia’s borders (excluding Nagorno–Karabakh). Consequently, they threaten to destabilize not Russia itself, but strategically important regions of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In addition, radical Islamists could penetrate into Russian territory from these conflict zones, which would significantly increase the risk of terrorist attacks in Russia.
- Attempts by the United States and its allies and partners (primarily Saudi Arabia and Turkey) to set up a regime in Syria that is to their liking, which could lead to the collapse of Syrian statehood, which is precisely what happened in Somalia and Libya;
- The continued U.S. military presence in the region;
- In addition to the above–mentioned possibility of power projection, U.S. military bases in the region are actively used to collect intelligence about the militaries of Russia and its allies. Besides, they have large quantities of precision–guided weapons, which could be deployed for a “quick global strike” at Russia.
- The Shia–Sunni confrontation in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain;
- Muslims living in Russia are mostly Sunni Muslims, which is why Russia does everything it can to avoid becoming embroiled in military conflicts on the side of the Shia Iran (this has less relevance with regard to Syria, since Alawites are only provisionally classified as Shia Muslims).

The Iran–Israel confrontation, bordering on military hostilities, which forces Russia to conduct itself with extreme caution when supplying Iran with modern weapons and equipment.

Regarding non–traditional security threats, Russia pays particular attention to Islamic extremism, drug trafficking and illegal trade in weapons and munitions, separatism, illegal migration, and also various manifestation of transnational crime.

Consequently, Russia and Iran face the following common traditional security challenges:

- Unresolved armed conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Nagorno–Karabakh and Iraq, Yemen, as well as the conflict between Israel and Palestine;

⁶⁵ 70th session of the UN General Assembly // President of Russia. Official site. Moscow, September 28, 2015.
URL: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>

- The Iran–Saudi Arabia and Iran–Israel confrontations;
- The continued U.S. military presence in the region.

On the whole, Russia and Iran face the same non–traditional security challenges. The joint struggle against Islamic extremism is obvious: in Syria and Iraq, it is represented by the radical organization Islamic State; in Afghanistan, it manifests itself in the form of the Taliban movement. This objectively brings Russia and Iran together, requiring ever closer cooperation between the special services, as well as the militaries, of the two countries. But this does not often happen in practice – in the fight against drug trafficking from Afghanistan, for instance. This is because of the different paths used to transport drugs (the so–called “northern route” poses no immediate threat for Iran) and to the lack of real interaction between the special services of Russia and Iran in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the priority ranking of non–traditional challenges is somewhat different in the two countries. In particular, separatism has lost some of its relevance in Russia, although it is manifested in the North Caucasus and in the strategically important Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

Undoubtedly, Russia and Iran have real opportunities to overcome the current security challenges together. Yet at the same time, there are certain limiting forces that affect cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in this area. Let’s consider the issue by taking the settlement of the regional armed conflicts as our example.

Russia–Iran cooperation is hardly possible in achieving a settlement of the Palestine–Israel conflict, since Russia is a member of the Quartet on the Middle East and, together with the United States, the European Union and the United Nations, Russia promotes an exclusively peaceful settlement. Iran, on the contrary, provides aid to the Hezbollah and HAMAS, aiming to weaken Israel as much as possible (ideally, to cause its collapse). Obviously, Iran’s policy is unacceptable for Russia.

As regards Yemen, limited cooperation between Russia Iran is possible, even though Iran is involved in this conflict on the side of the Houthis. Gradually, Tehran is coming to the realization that it will not succeed in breaking Saudi Arabia with the help of the Houthis and Shia Arabs. President of Iran Hassan Rouhani as good as confirmed this in late January 2016 during his visit to Italy and Vatican City State. “We do not aspire to have tense relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two states that play a very important role in the region. We are interested in restoring security in the Middle East, and we believe that in fact, the Islamic State terrorist group is the greatest problem of the region”⁶⁶. This serves as a foundation for a mutually acceptable compromise based on the status quo achieved. Yet, the fact that, historically, Moscow has supported South Yemen (Houthis live in the north of the country) should be taken into account.

In Afghanistan, Russia and Iran’s interests coincide to a much greater degree. This much was confirmed by Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation

⁶⁶ Rouhani: Iran Does Not Want Escalation with Saudi Arabia // Haqqin.az Information and Analytics Portal. Baku, January 27, 2016. URL: <http://haqqin.az/news/62240> (in Russian).

Sergey Shoygu during his visit to Tehran in January 2015. Having met with Hossein Dehghan, the Minister of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics of the Islamic Republic, Shoygu said: “We exchanged opinions on a series of pressing issues of international and regional security, primarily on the situation in the Middle East and in Afghanistan. Our assessments of the situation are largely similar or coincide.” In particular, both countries intend to coordinate their efforts to fight international terrorism and drug trafficking⁶⁷.

However, unlike Russia, Iran is one of Afghanistan’s principal investors. Unofficial data suggests that there are over 1.5 million Afghan refugees and labour migrants in Iran⁶⁸. We should not underestimate, for instance, Tehran’s influence on Persian-speaking Shia Hazaras, some of whom even fight in Syria under the command of officers of Iran’s Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution⁶⁹. The flip side is Iran’s desire to gain control over parts of Afghan territory (in particular, the Herat Province).

In Nagorno–Karabakh, both Russia and Iran promote a peaceful settlement of the armed conflict. The positions of Moscow and Tehran on the issue almost fully coincide, including prohibiting western peace-keepers from entering the conflict zone. However, Russia co-chairs the OSCE’s Minsk Group on the Nagorno–Karabakh settlement (alongside the United States and France), is an ally of Armenia, and has a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. Consequently, it was President Vladimir Putin who was the principal driving force behind the cessation of the so-called Four-Day War in Nagorno–Karabakh in early April 2016.

The closest interaction between Russia and Iran can be seen in Syria, which includes fighting such radical groups as Islamic State and the al–Nusra Front. Yet this interaction is largely tactical. Moscow plays a crucial role in the search for a peaceful settlement, which requires cooperation not only with the United States, but also with Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel, i.e., with Iran’s rivals in the region. Apparently, Russia will continue to play an ever greater part in Syria, while Iran’s influence will wane somewhat.

It should also be taken into account that Russia does not want the Golan Heights to become a site for launching strikes against Israel, and it does not want Syria to turn into a transportation corridor for Hezbollah. On the other hand, Russia–Iran interaction is extremely necessary if Syria is to remain single state, and Moscow understands this perfectly.

Russia makes every effort to avoid becoming embroiled in the armed conflict in Iraq, which is looking more and more like a Shia–Sunni confrontation. Moscow supplies weapons to Baghdad and, to a lesser degree, Erbil. But it does not train any armed groups and does not provide air support. Iran is directly involved in attempts to resolve the conflict through the use of force, and is interested in

⁶⁷ Shoygu: Iran Understands Russia’s Stance on Afghanistan // RIA Novosti. Moscow, January 20, 2015. URL: http://www.ria.ru/defense_safety/20150120/1043376109.html (in Russian).

⁶⁸ Pankratenko I. Afghanistan: Tehran’s Eastern Front // Iran.Ru Russian Information Agency. Moscow, September 15, 2014. URL: http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/94621/Afganistan_vostochnyy_front_Tegerana (in Russian).

⁶⁹ Gorokhov P. Iran Sends Thousands of Volunteer Fighters to Aid Bashar al-Assad // Ridus: Civil Journalism Agency. Moscow, June 5, 2015. URL: <https://www.ridus.ru/news/187579.html> (In Russian).

maintaining Shia dominance there. This will clearly split the country, which Russia is against.

Consequently, Russia and Iran have common security threats that are both traditional and non-traditional in nature. Overcoming these threats together will allow the two countries to proceed with certainty toward a strategic partnership. Yet this path does not offer opportunities alone, as it is also strewn with significant hurdles, primarily due to diverging national interests. This will be manifested with ever greater clarity in Syria, for instance, when it comes to the issue of its future state system. Such diverging interests are not fundamental in nature, and mutual compromise is quite possible. Moreover, it is of vital necessity for both Russia and Iran.

Cooperation in International Organizations

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit, which took place in Tashkent on June 23–24, 2016 in Tashkent, clearly showed that the SCO had set a course for expanding its membership. India and Pakistan signed the necessary memoranda, and it is highly probable that they will become full-fledged members of the SCO at the next SCO Summit, which will be held in Astana in July 2017. This will mark the beginning of the SCO's qualitative transformation, which will require a temporary moratorium on admitting new members for approximately five years.

An obvious candidate for membership in the SCO is Iran, which submitted the necessary application long ago. With the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the settlement of the Iranian nuclear problem coming into force in late 2015, Tehran's application may now be considered practically. Yet it should be taken into account that decisions in the SCO are made by consensus. That means that Tehran should carry out active work with those SCO member states which do not support such a step for the organization (in particular, with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Time is running out with regard to adopting the moratorium on the expansion of the SCO, so Iran should speed up its activities in this area.

I believe that the SCO is a good site for Russia–Iran interaction. The SCO allows various resources to be employed (including those needed to overcome both traditional and non-traditional security challenges), which could be provided by other states members (primarily China and India). This is why the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, whose activities go far beyond fighting terrorism, was created. The SCO, as a possible model of the future world system, has other mechanisms for overcoming current security challenges, and Russia's positions in the SCO will be strengthened after admitting India to membership.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) warrants particular mention among international organizations that are active in the security area. The CSTO is a military and political bloc intended to overcome traditional and non-traditional challenges. Iran's membership would be extremely useful for resolving a series of regional problems, but it is impossible even in the medium to long term, as it would require Moscow and Tehran to become allies. Instead, a partnership could be established between Iran and the CSTO Secretariat, which would allow Teh-

ran to strengthen military and political relations with Russia and attempt to form a Russia–Iran–Tajikistan trilateral dialogue to overcome the security challenges posed by Afghanistan.

What is more, since 2003, the CSTO has been carrying out Operation Channel, recognized by the UN as the largest and most effective operation aimed at preventing drug trafficking from Afghanistan⁷⁰. Iran's special services actively participate in the project, which allows Russia and Iran to work efficiently to overcome this non-traditional challenge together, including through the creation of financial security belts around Afghanistan.

The CSTO also pays special attention to fighting illegal migration. It takes preventive measures and also conducts special operations with the code name *Illegal Aliens*, which allow the migration services and law enforcement to keep control of the situation and also to amend migration legislation and to take administrative and preventive measures in the CSTO countries⁷¹. It would be expedient to include Iran in these activities in order to regularly exchange information on the migration situation and to predict possible risks and threats.

Certainly, there are other sites for Russia–Iran security interaction. In particular, the two countries could cooperate closer on the Nagorno–Karabakh issue within the framework of the OSCE; the issue of containing Islamic extremism by using the potential of Islamic foundations (centres and other organizations) within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; and on the Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen conflicts within the UN.

Thus, Russia and Iran both face common security challenges and have significant possibilities for overcoming them. The history of cooperation between the two countries has been mixed, in particular, due to partially diverging national interests regarding several regional problems. But this is not an insurmountable obstacle to Russia and Iran forging a strategic partnership. Iran joining the SCO as a full-fledged member and establishing partnership with the CSTO Secretariat could be of significant help in that regard.

⁷⁰ Anti-Drug Operation "Channel" Conducted by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation Recognized by UN as Largest and Most Effective Operation Aimed at Preventing Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan // Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Moscow. URL: <http://www.odkb.gov.ru/e/azkk.htm> (in Russian).

⁷¹ Denisenko E. Kyrgyzstan Will Take Part in the Illegal Alien 2016 Operation // *Vecherny Bishkek*. Bishkek, February 9, 2016 (in Russian).

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Sharing common borders with Iran and Russia, Central Asia and South Caucasus create both threats and opportunities for Tehran and Moscow, some of which are common to both states. While long-term interests of Iran and Russia are in accordance with the security and stability of strategic regions like Central Asia and Caucasus, some common challenges and threats may escalate regional disputes including political, religious and ethnic differences, interference of trans-regional powers and the increasing relations of countries like Georgia and Azerbaijan with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Nonetheless, the common interests, challenges and threats have not paved the way for a stable collaboration between Iran and Russia. The reason might be not just disagreement on the type of cooperation, but also lack of a common definition of the nature of threats and/or whether to regard an issue as a challenge. Given that threat is an intersubjective phenomenon, it seems that high-level exchange of views and bilateral security and political consultation can help bring their views closer. One of the main common threats to the Iranian and Russian security and interests is NATO expansion to Central Asia and Caucasus. According to Russia's political and security strategy documents, NATO has been recognized as a historical and serious threat and accordingly, Moscow's attempts have been aimed at preventing NATO from expanding to Eastern Europe, Central Asia and South Caucasus. However, aside from NATO expansion to Eastern Europe, it seems either the Russians do not recognize the need to collaborate with Iran, or feel skeptical about Iran's stance on NATO's expansion to Central Asia and South Caucasus.

NATO Expansion and Iran's Regional Security

There is no discussion of NATO being a threat to Iran among Iranian political elites. Taking the main objective of NATO establishment into account, it might technically not fit into the definition of a threat against Iran; however, examining the existential nature and ultimate objectives of western-led organization, one would realize the shifts in NATO doctrine compared with that of pre-Cold War era or even the last decade, to the detriment of Iran's security. Since 1991, NATO has emphasized the necessity of taking action in the regions beyond Europe, or as it is called "Outside the North Atlantic Area". NATO has expanded both the scope and diversity of its missions, using mechanisms and initiatives, namely 'The Euro-Atlantic Partnership', 'Partnership for Peace' (PfP), 'Mediterranean Dialogue' and 'Istanbul Cooperation Initiative' (ICI) in order to expand NATO presence on Russia's borders and hence, get closer to Iran. Strategically speaking, Iran is concerned with the negative consequences of NATO-Russia relatively aggressive moves against each other in the Central Asia and Caucasus, and therefore to pose implicit threats to the neighboring Iran.

Encircling Iran. After the NATO Istanbul Summit in June 2004 with a declaration dubbed "Our Security in A New Era", NATO within the ICI expanded its area of activities in the regions linked to Iran's geopolitics – from the Persian Gulf to East Asia, to Eastern Europe to the north of Iran. Currently, NATO either operates inside or works closely with most of the states sharing borders with Iran. In addition to its presence in Turkey, NATO has shared approximately one thousand

kilometers of border with Iran from the Afghan territory since 2001, and is now trying to expand its relations with Pakistan. Following the Istanbul declaration, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council ([P]GCC) is aiming to approach NATO and actively cooperate with the Organization. In the meantime, NATO has designed and put some mechanisms to work in Central Asia and South Caucasus in order to foster and expand ties with the post–Soviet republics. It seems that Azerbaijan and Georgia’s intention to join NATO will create bigger challenges for Iran in the coming years, due to the fact that the western–led organization considers Tehran as a threat now more than it did in the past.

Formulating a new military doctrine and defining Iran as a threat. The evolution of NATO doctrine after the Cold War resulted in Iran being included in the list of NATO enemies. A clear example of NATO’s perception of the Iranian threat is cited in the Lisbon Summit’s Report of the Group of Experts “NATO’s New Strategic Concept”, which recognizes the potential threat of the Iranian nuclear and missile programs. The report emphasizes that Iran’s conventional weapons program, and anti–ship cruise missiles in particular are the source of great concern, particularly for the security of vital maritime trade routes. On the other hand, based on NATO’s Article 5 guarantee mandates, the development of Iran’s arsenal of long–range missiles will make Iran a major threat in the coming decade. Moreover, concerns over Iran’s capability to launch missile attacks on European NATO members are expressed in the report. Accordingly, under NATO’s Article 5, the organization is fully committed to defend all NATO members from any Iranian missile attacks, noting that by 2020, Iran’s missile capability will develop enough to reach some parts of Europe. Besides, the development of Iran’s coast–to–sea missile capabilities is considered to be a serious threat for the security of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman. The report compiled before the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) says that Iranian attempts to enrich uranium and develop nuclear weapons along with Tehran non–compliance with the relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) will raise the profile of North Atlantic Treaty. At the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016, NATO leaders hailed the JCPOA. However, it stressed that the organization “remain[s] seriously concerned by the development of Iran’s ballistic missile programme and continuing missile tests that are inconsistent with UNSCR 2231.”

Iranian foreign and defence policy decision–makers unanimously agree that NATO’s presence in the periphery of Iran is a threat to its security. Iran believes that the possible activation of crises and struggles in the region in the coming years is one of the significant outcomes of NATO’s encircling Iran. Tehran believes that NATO is a military power which is under the US thumb, thus threatening Iran’s national security. Additionally, Israel–NATO cooperation is certainly against Iran’s national and regional priorities. Moreover, NATO in the Persian Gulf and its cooperation with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in particular would be threatening Iran’s security in the long term. Last but not least, NATO’s long term objectives in Afghanistan are at odds with Iran’s interests.

Therefore, there is the undeniable fact that Iran borders on NATO, in other words Turkey. This situation lasted for more than half a century and prepared the ground for Iran–NATO linkage in the form of The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which is currently entering a new phase. In other words, any transformations of the organization’s defensive attitude in regard to regional affairs into international ones and adoption of aggressive policies as well as new security approaches, on the one hand, and the organization’s attempt to introduce Iran’s missile program as a looming threat, on the other hand, would cloud a clear vision of NATO’s withdrawal from Iran’s periphery. Although Iran has defined its defensive structure in a way that confronts any assault to its territory, the structure is not merely developed to resist NATO.

The situation has made Iran sensitive to NATO’s military mechanisms. Thus, the Iranian defensive and diplomatic systems should be prepared to confront NATO’s actions in the Iranian neighbourhood. Therefore, strategies which require Russian cooperation should be held in order to restrict NATO’s presence in the periphery of Iran including Central Asia and Southern Caucasus. In this context a key question is whether the Iranian–Russian cooperation on confronting NATO in their shared neighborhood is feasible.

Iranian–Russian Cooperation against NATO: Opportunities and Constraints

Iran and Russia have had tumultuous relations over the past two decades which have been mainly affected by their political interactions with the US and the West. Although the post–revolutionary Iran’s approach towards Washington and western governments over the past 37 years has been unchanged even after Tehran signed JCPOA in July 2015, Russia’s ties with the US and NATO have held many obscurities and ups and downs. The reason for the fluctuating nature of the relations relates to Moscow’s policy in regard to Washington which defines Russia’s approach towards western–led NATO. The Kremlin has regarded NATO as a national security threat since 2000 in all its national security documents. Thus, it seems that despite the fact that Ukraine and Syria crises have overshadowed the Russia–NATO ties, Moscow is still interested in regulating the bilateral relationship with the Organization. It is noteworthy to mention that at the 2010 Lisbon Summit, by aligning to NATO’s security doctrine which labelled Iran as a ‘threat’, Russia was able to make sure that NATO European members express their agreement with Russia’s joining the European security structure, and on the other hand, to play a subtle role against any probable Iran–NATO interactions in case of regional threats, albeit the Russia–NATO ties have deteriorated in the years after the Lisbon Summit due to the Ukraine crisis.

Whereas, the Russian–NATO relations are still strained, the factor that hinders Iranian–Russian cooperation against NATO is that Moscow does not chiefly respect cooperation with Iran in bids to confront NATO’s threat in Central Asia and South Caucasus. Another chief obstacle is that the Iranian elites who consider NATO a threat are mostly those who also consider Israel a serious threat to the entire region. This is deemed as a clear example of a serious disagreement

between Tehran and Moscow. Therefore, as Russia is inclined to adopt measures against NATO, it is indifferent to the development of Israeli relations with the governments in Central Asia and South Caucasus.

It seems Iranian–Russian constructive engagement is a suitable strategy against increasing NATO threats in Central Asia and South Caucasus. Such engagement would surely reduce the incurred cost of Russian unilateral rivalry with NATO. The recently indirect confrontation between Moscow and NATO has proven Russian preference for hybrid attitudes (defensive and offensive) towards the western-led organization for the sake of hindering its power projection in Russia's peripheries. Despite its great military power in the world, Russia, in the words of President Vladimir Putin, knows the intentions of NATO and the West to drive Russia towards a military race, to the detriment of the Russian economy.

In other words, regional initiatives under Iranian–Russian cooperation would not only decline the necessity of a military race in the region, but also they would maintain the security of the region and provide a basis for economic growth in Iran, Russia and other regional countries. Among chief motives behind Iran's attempts to join regional institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are to strengthen such local initiatives against NATO expansion to Central Asia. In that context, as China considers NATO expansion as a threat to its security, Iran and Russia should seriously ponder about Beijing intentions in deterring NATO from approaching its peripheries.

Another local initiative under the auspices of Iran and Russia is to involve NATO-oriented states such as Azerbaijan, in the initiative. Baku has grabbed the attention of NATO for a while Azeri leaders have contacted and worked with the organization in different manners. The recent trilateral Summit of Iranian, Russian and Azerbaijani presidents held in Baku on August 2016 was a crucial step in cementing the relationship of Azerbaijan with Iran and Russia and reducing Baku subordination to NATO's security umbrella.

Besides the above-mentioned advantages of Russian cooperative attempts with Iran and other regional states, two more points require more consideration: first, an inclusive approach to security; second, attention to interests, concerns and status of regional actors.

The core essence of existing challenges on the Iranian and Russian peripheries, in particular the South Caucasus, does not require solely hardware approaches because such military attitudes could become part of the problem – not part of the solution. Addressing common security concerns, namely terrorism, ethnic conflicts, organized crime, environmental disasters to name but a few, necessitates a comprehensive agenda and grand cultural, social, political, economic and developmental planning in order to successfully challenge western values in the region.

Last but not least, experience proves maintenance of stability and security in any regional and international systems links to understanding interests, concerns and the engagement of all members and their appropriate role taking in that system. Right now, terrorism and extremism, weak states and the intervention of extra-regional powers are three main interlocking challenges in South Caucasus.

To protect themselves from western human rights and political criticisms, some regional governments offer concessions to the western states and NATO, to the detriment of the security of Tehran and Moscow. Therefore, with consultation about new security arrangements in the region, Iran and Russia should take the interests, concerns and status of regional actors into account.

Topic 6. Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Struggling Terrorism and Religious Extremism

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Who are the Salafis?

To begin with, let us try to define what exactly radical Islam is and why a great number of its followers have an uncompromising attitude towards other cultures and religions. Today, this phenomenon is known as “Salafism” or “Wahhabism”.

Islamic jurisprudence is divided into schools, or madhhabs. The four primary Sunni madhhabs are the Hanafi, the Hanbali, the Shafi’i and the Maliki schools. These schools differ in their attitudes towards the main sources of Islamic law – the Quran, the Sunnah, the Ijma and the qiyas.⁷² The Hanbalis are the most conservative among Muslim scholars. They only recognize the Quran and the Sunnah as the main sources of Islamic law.⁷³

The renowned scholar Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) founded the Hanbalis school. The doctrine was revived in the 18th century by Muhammad ibn Abd al–Wahhab (1703 or 1704–1792), the founder of the so–called Salafi (“Wahhabi”) movement. According to Abd al–Wahhab, Islam has to be purified of harmful innovation (Bid’ah). In particular, Abd al–Wahhab thought that it was heresy to believe in magic performed by anyone except God, opposed the cult of saints that was characteristic of Sufi religious practices, and denounced pilgrimage to places not linked directly with God’s name, as well as sacrifice, vows, etc.⁷⁴ This means that, from the point of view of Abd al–Wahhab’s followers, Iran’s Shias, who endow the leader of their community with superhuman abilities (“sahib az–zaman” – the master of time capable of mediating for sinners before Allah, hide high in the mountains and return to the world after many centuries, etc.), have given in to kufr (disbelief) and must be either corrected or exterminated.

It should be noted in the above context that the leaders of Islamic State (an organization banned in Russia), which today is the most audacious proponent of the Islamist doctrine, view themselves as ideological followers of ibn Hanbal and Abd al–Wahhab.

According to the BBC, the leader of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al–Baghdadi (real name: Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al–Badri⁷⁵), also known as Caliph Ibrahim, preached at the Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal Mosque in Samarra in the early 2000s.⁷⁶ Al–Baghdadi’s semi–official biography traces his genealogical roots to the tribe of Quraish, to which the founder of Islam himself belonged.⁷⁷ It is extremely difficult

⁷² Ijma refers to a consensus opinion of Muslim scholars on certain religious and legal issues not covered in the Quran or the Sunnah. Qiyas is a judgment on precedents not covered in the Quran or the Sunnah in comparison to those described there.

⁷³ The East and Politics // Political Systems, Political Cultures, Political Processes. Moscow, 2011.

⁷⁴ Vasilyev A.M. History of Saudi Arabia. URL: <http://www.e-reading.by/book.php?book=1034067> (in Russian).

⁷⁵ What is ‘Islamic State’? // BBC news, 2 December 2015. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>

⁷⁶ Zelin Aaron Y. Abu Bakr al–Baghdadi: Islamic State’s Driving Force // BBC news, 31 July 2014. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28560449>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

to tell for sure if this is true, yet the fact that the al-Baghdadi's biographers, on whose information journalists usually rely, try to link him personally to the proponents of "pure Islam" (such as ibn Hanbal, Abd al-Wahhab and others) is beyond doubt. Therefore, the ideological portion of Islamic State's doctrine can safely be associated with the Wahhabi teachings and the Hanbali madhhab in general.

Radical Islam in Iran

Iran has faced religious extremism throughout most of its recent history. Almost immediately after the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the People's Mojahedin of Iran movement (led, according to experts, by the opposition Rajavi clan) has become one of the leading opponents of the new Iranian leadership.⁷⁸ For a long time, the organization was engaged in sabotage and terrorist attacks inside Iran. Its victims included both ordinary people and ranking officials and Shia clerics. The Mujahidin's activity peaked in 1981, when they assassinated the Second President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammad Bahonar. That same year, the Mojahedin bombed the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party, killing dozens of its members including its leader, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti. The Iranian government retaliated with vigour. The People's Mojahedin of Iran were subjected to violent repressions before being squeezed out of Iran altogether.

Having secured the patronage of Saddam Hussein, the Mojahedin were based for a long time at Camp Ashraf in Iraq, where they planned attacks against the Iranian troops.⁷⁹ The organization effectively met its end in 2003, when forces of the anti-Saddam coalition disarmed the radicals (remarkably, the United States put the People's Mojahedin of Iran on its watch list of terrorist organizations in the 1990s, only to lift the ban in 2012, ostensibly because the organization had abandoned its extremist tactics.)⁸⁰

Indeed, the People's Mojahedin of Iran cannot be considered an Islamist organization in the proper sense of this term. Its ideology is a weird mix of religious and leftist theories and views. The organization should be compared to Arab socialists, whose paradigm has always combined the idea of the possibility of a just state based on left wing doctrines and a loyalty to religious traditions, rather than to the Salafis.

The Jundallah movement is a totally different matter.

This entity is unequivocally associated with the Wahhabis and is waging a religious war against Iranian Shias in the Sistan and Baluchestan Province. According to various estimates, its fighters are responsible for the deaths of hundreds and perhaps thousands of Iranian soldiers and police officers.⁸¹ Nobody knows

⁷⁸ Bridey H. Iran's Fight against Terrorism. Iran's Relationship with Terrorism, when Seen through Western eyes, is Murky at Best. URL: <http://www.contributoria.com/issue/2015-02/5491a707f24152fc42000029>

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ See, for example: Iran's Mojahedin dropped from the list of terrorist organizations. URL: <http://1news.az/region/Iran/20120929024233447.html>; Bridey H. Op. cit.

⁸¹ Sunni Group Vows to Behead Iranians // The Washington Times, January 16, 2006. URL: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/jan/16/20060116-124019-6619r>

exactly when the Jundallah was founded. Western sources claim it was founded in 2003, while regional sources insist that it was in 2002.⁸²

Yet the Jundallah (like the Pashtun Taliban) did not pose a systemic threat to Iran. Both organizations remained within a strictly regional structure, while trying to expand their influence into relatively small areas in Western and Central Asia (the Jundallah in the Baluch territories, and the Taliban in Pashtun). Islamic State has mounted a much more formidable challenge for Tehran.

Islamic State, which has risen from the ruins of Saddam Hussein's Iraq thanks, among other things, to the short-sighted policy of the former Prime Minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki (whose multi-year activity to bring the country's Sunni areas under control was cheered on by Iran's leadership, among others),⁸³ is an international organization counting thousands of radicals from almost every country of the East among its members. The U.S. National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas Rasmussen estimated that the group had attracted more than 28,000 foreign fighters.⁸⁴ The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation's data are broadly consistent with the U.S. estimates. Russian defence experts put the number of foreign Islamic State members at between 25,000 and 30,000.⁸⁵

Fighting Methods

Iran's main method for countering today's Islamist threat is by force.

According to Saudi officials and other sources, Iranian specialists are helping both Hezbollah elements fighting Islamic State in Syria, as well as Bashar al-Assad's troops.⁸⁶ The Iranians are heavily involved in the fight against the radicals in Iraq. Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force special unit of the Iranian Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, has been sighted in that country on a number of occasions.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, according to reports in the western media, Iranian instructors are training Shia militias and taking part in operations against Islamic State.⁸⁸

Inside Iran, the government closely monitors the activities of small radical Sunni groups (besides the Baluch, many have Kurdish or Turkmen affiliations.)⁸⁹ Their

⁸² Sunni Movements in Iran. An Interview with Expert Sabah al-Moussawi.
URL: <http://www.ru.assakina.com/?p=541> (in Russian).

⁸³ For more details, see: Demidenko S. Iraq: Change of Scenery // *Vestnik Analitiki*. 2014. No. 3.

⁸⁴ What is 'Islamic State'?

⁸⁵ Peremitin G. Ministry of Defense Estimates the Number of Foreigners Fighting for IS // RBC news, June 4, 2015.
URL: <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/11/2015/56398f199a794742adf514e1> (in Russian).

⁸⁶ International News // Interfax. January 20, 2014. 17:18; International News // Interfax. February 14, 2013. 21:59 (both in Russian).

⁸⁷ See, for example: General Qasem Soleimani: Iran's Rising Star // BBC news, 6 March 2015.
URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27883162>.

⁸⁸ Iran's ISIS Policy. / Chatham House. The Royal institute of international affairs. URL: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_publication_docs/INTA91_1_01_Esfandiary_Tabatabai.pdf

⁸⁹ Sunni Movements in Iran. An Interview with Expert Sabah al-Moussawi // Assakina.
URL: <http://www.ru.assakina.com/?p=541>, (in Russian).

activities are restricted by surveillance from the special services and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (which approves the programmes of action of religious organizations and issues them with the necessary licenses.)⁹⁰

Yet force is not the only method used by Iran to fight the Salafis. It should be clearly understood that Iran's ideological doctrine (based, among other things, on the key provisions of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran⁹¹) states that the country has ambitions to be the leader of all Muslims. This is why, if only for the sake of the integrity of its message, Iran cannot extrapolate its negative attitude towards Sunni radicals to the entire Sunni universe. Thus, in summer 2014, Chairman of Expediency Discernment Council Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani met with leading ulama and political leaders of Iran's Sunni communities. The Ayatollah stated at the forum that Iran does not differentiate between Sunnis and Shias and is ready to protect the rights of all Muslims, no matter their sectarian affiliation.⁹² This claim is particularly well illustrated by Tehran's stance towards the Palestinian problem. In the context of countering Israel, Iran is even willing to work with Palestinian religious radicals who, in theory, are supposed to be its sworn enemies. In early 2013, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran Javad Zarif met in Beirut with Ramadan Abdullah Shalah, the leader of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine. According to Iranian media, the talks focused on the deterioration of the situation in Lebanon.⁹³

That is, Iran only views those Sunnis who wage an armed struggle against the state of Iran or other representatives of religious minorities as radical Islamists.

It is very important to note that Iran has strong and influential Shia clerics. Among other things, the country is characterized by a clear-cut religious hierarchy (the Sunnis do not have such a hierarchy, meaning that anyone from among their ranks can issue a fatwa; Bin Laden, Dokka Umarov and other Islamist guerrillas were known to dabble in it) and a high prestige among ordinary people. Ayatollahs can fight radicals effectively in an area where the latter consider themselves to be prominent scholars – in Islamic theology. Wahhabi interpretations of religious dogmas are mostly alien to Shiites in Iran (according to the CIA, the Shia account for approximately 90–95 percent of the Iranian population),⁹⁴ because their religious conscience does not accept the irreconcilability of the Wahhabis and the specifics of their approaches to the interpretation of sacred texts. This means that radical Sunni Islam presents more of an external, rather than domestic, threat to Tehran.

As the influence of the Salafis' spreads, Iran will see its geopolitical capabilities restrained and the situation in some of the country's regions (Sunni regions) deteriorate. But there will not be a wholesale domestic crisis. Practice has dem-

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Preamble and Article 154 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran // CIS-Europe Monitoring Organization. URL: http://www.cis-emo.net/sites/default/files/imagesimce/constitution_of_iran.pdf

⁹² One Result of the Gaza Conflict: Iran and Hamas are Back Together // Time, August 19, 2014. URL: <http://www.time.com/3138366/iran-and-hamas-alliance-after-gaza-war>

⁹³ Quoted from: Interfax // International News. January 13, 2014. 17:35.

⁹⁴ World Factbook: Iran // CIA. URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

onstrated that radical Islam acclimatizes poorly on alien ethnic or cultural soil. When they end up in a cultural environment that is different from their own, extremists do not try to blend in, rather, they try to aggressively change the situation to their own liking. And very often the environment will push back against them (this is why Wahhabism cannot put down roots in places like Libya, the home of Sufism since as far back as the 19th century).⁹⁵ This is the reason for a defeat of the Salafis in the historical perspective. The movement's ideology is one of struggle and protest, but not one of creation. Shia Islam in Iran, on the other hand, has already proved its mettle in the opposite sense (otherwise, the cause of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution would have long been forgotten under pressure from the U.S. sanctions, the plotting of Saudi Arabia and actions by radical fighters).

Iran and Islamism in Afghanistan and Central Asia

As the Islamist threat has intensified, Afghanistan has become an important focus for Iran's foreign policy. The Iranian leadership has always paid special attention to its relations with Kabul. Obviously, this was not only due to security considerations (Afghanistan is one of the largest markets for Iranian goods; according to data from the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs service, Afghanistan is Iran's third largest importer with a 7.35 percent market share).⁹⁶ Tehran long provided aid to the internationally recognized government in Kabul. Former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai regularly stressed the Islamic Republic's important role in maintaining security in his country.⁹⁷ These days, the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei meets with official representatives of the Afghan government to express his support for Kabul's efforts to fight radicals.⁹⁸

Yet Tehran's Afghan policy has recently started showing some new signs, however subtle they may be. These changes are directly caused by Islamic State's rising influence in Afghanistan.

According to a number of military experts cited, among others, by major American media outlets, Islamic State is active in Afghanistan's eastern provinces. The number of guerrillas based there is estimated at 1,000–3,000.⁹⁹ Not only that, but Islamic State has also become such a competitive force in some regions that it dares challenge the formerly mighty Taliban itself (skirmishes between Islamic State and Taliban fighters have recently become an integral part of Afghanistan's political landscape).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ For more details, see: Demidenko S. *Libya: A Second Front for IS? // West – East – Russia – 2015*. Moscow: IMEMO. 2016.

⁹⁶ Quoted from: *Exporter's Handbook. Iran 2015*, p. 8 // TerraCognita. URL: <http://www.iranterra.ru/2015.pdf> (in Russian).

⁹⁷ See, for example: Hamid Karzai expressed gratitude to Iran // Iran Russian radio, May 18, 2010.

URL: <http://www.russian.irib.ir/news/iran1/item/113029-2010-05-18-16-15-06>;

Karzai: Iran's Assistance helped Afghanistan to take its rightful place // Iran.ru, December 27, 2005. URL: http://www.iran.ru/news/politics/36394/Karzay_Sodeystvie_Irana_pozvolilo_Afganistanu_zanyat_ego_istinnoe_mesto (both in Russian).

⁹⁸ See, for example: Ayatollah Khamenei: Iran Maintains Security in Afghanistan, 24.05.2016.

URL: <http://www.afghanistanatoday.ru/hovosti/ayatolla-hamenei-iran> (in Russian).

⁹⁹ U.S. Airstrikes Target Thousands of Islamic State Fighters in Afghanistan. URL: <http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/us-airstrikes-target-thousands-of-islamic-state-fighters-in-afghanistan-1.393548>

¹⁰⁰ See, for example: In eastern Afghanistan, militants clashed ISIL and Taliban / Regnum news agency, February 12, 2016. URL: <https://www.regnum.ru/news/2077301.html> (in Russian).

Given the above, some international and Russian-language media have been reporting alleged contacts between the Iranian leadership and the Taliban.¹⁰¹ According to western sources, cooperation between what were until recently two irreconcilable foes is tactical and is caused by Islamic State. Of course, this information needs to be double checked (especially since the Iran side flatly denies it), yet ignoring it is not an option either (Chairman of the National Partnership Party of Afghanistan Najibullah Kabuli revealed the existence of such contacts at an official news conference).¹⁰²

The Islamic State threat hangs over Afghanistan, as well as the whole of Central Asia, where Islamists have been able to recruit adherents on a regular basis due to the difficult socio-economic and political situation in the region. According to CIA reports, Uzbekistan constitute the largest Central Asian community in the Islamists' midst.¹⁰³ It should also be taken into account that, according to certain reports, the region's leading radical organization – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – formerly a reliable ally of the Taliban, swore allegiance to Islamic State back in 2014 (when IMU leader Usman Ghazi stated that the true leader of Afghanistan's Islamists, Mullah Mohammad Omar, died 14 years ago, and that the current Taliban leadership was mired in "lies, Afghanization (*apparently he meant a treason of the cause of Muslim unity – Author's note*) and nepotism."¹⁰⁴

Radical Islam and Russia

As far as Russia is concerned, the situation with regard to the spread of radical Islam in the country is similar to that in Iran in some respects and different in others. On the one hand, in Russia, just like in Iran, this phenomenon is only able to present a serious threat to some of its regions. On the other hand, however, Russia does not have a powerful ideology that could compete with the social and religious paradigm of the Wahhabis (only Daghestan's Sufi sheikhs can offer some sort of message to counter the Salafis). These regions also suffer from a lack of education – both secular and basic religious education (according to opinion polls, most Russian Muslims cannot tell if they are Sunni or Shia).¹⁰⁵ Russia's traditional social ills – corruption, cronyism, tribalism – are among important drivers of radicalization.

Due to Russia's cultural sensitivities, most of the methods used by Iran to fight Islamists cannot be adopted, with the possible exception of the use of force (in this area, Moscow and Tehran could even intensify cooperation between their special services, expand the exchange of information and organize joint actions against radical groups in the Middle East, where Russia has been trying to return in recent years, and with relative success). Yet the most promising area of coope-

¹⁰¹ Iran and "Taliban" cooperate in the fight against Islamic State // TASS news agency, May 26, 23:39.
URL: <http://www.tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3317467> (in Russian).

¹⁰² National Partnership Party: Iran Secretly Supports the Taliban // Afganistan today, 11.06.2016.
URL: <http://www.afghanistantoday.ru/novosti/partiya-nacionalnogo> (in Russian).

¹⁰³ CIA World Factbook. Cit. by: What is 'Islamic State'?

¹⁰⁴ See, for example: URL: <http://www.eurasianews.info/ru/node/8240>

¹⁰⁵ Sreda Group opinion poll data. URL: <http://www.sreda.org/arena> (in Russian).

ration would be to intensify the political and economic presence in Afghanistan – the country that is the source of a substantial number of threats to both Russia and Iran that are linked with the spread of Islamic radicalism. Moscow and Tehran could work on the Afghan issue to develop a joint strategy that involves providing increased military, political, economic and humanitarian assistance to the incumbent Afghan leadership. It would make sense to include the United States, which is just as interested in intensifying the fight against religious radicals as Russia is (especially after a wave of terrorist attacks masterminded by fundamentalists that have hit the United States in recent years), in regular contacts on the Afghan dossier.

Strengthening cooperation among the three leading global powers in the fight against a common enemy is a guarantee for the stabilization of the entire global security system. There is reason to believe right now that common sense will eventually prevail over momentary political considerations and a global anti-terrorist alliance will finally be established (events such as Iran’s actual participation in the common fight alongside the United States against Islamic State in Iraq, or the coordination between the Russian and U.S. militaries in Syria, among others, suggest that this might be in the offing). So far, the outline of a future alliance is quite blurry, but it is entirely possible that increased extremist activity around the world (the fact that Islamists have gone on the offensive is indisputable) will nudge the leading global and regional powers towards deepening comprehensive cooperation in the nearest future.

Disparities between Extremism and Islamism

There are diverse and contradictory viewpoints on the concept of 'extremism' and it is hard to explain what it means and is comprised of. At the current time, we are facing a distorted reality that links extremism to Islamism and indeed, pictures the former as an inseparable element of Islam. However, studying the history of religions and the history of mankind, we realize that extremism has existed from day one and not been limited to merely one religion. Many non/anti-religion oriented intellectual schools of thought have had extremism within their tenets.

While extremism is as ubiquitous in all religions and societies, we only focus on Islamic extremism in Central Asia in this paper. When discussing Islamic extremism, we face common concepts including political Islam, fundamentalism, principalism, jihadism, militant Islam, radical Islam, to name but a few, each of which misused with each other.

The central focus of this article is not to define and explain these terms and concepts, but it tries to identify indicators for distinguishing between extremism and Islamism. In that regard, the paper will argue that Islam is inextricably linked to the civilization and history of the Central Asian nations, therefore it is a must to differentiate their inclination towards Islam from the phenomenon of extremism which is a misuse of religious beliefs of the Central Asian peoples. Therefore, to differentiate, we should be able to recognize the difference between the indicators of Islamism and core features of extremism.

The Islamic movements of Central Asia not only are not apart from entire Islamic movements of the Muslim world but also there exist a hidden or apparent intellectual, cultural and communicational relationship between the Central Asian and other Islamic movements. Of course, it should be noted that this does not necessarily mean an organizational relationship, but it may refer to a kind of association in which the principles of the Islamic movements of Central Asia are inspired by Islamic movements of the Muslim world. The vast majority of researchers and investigators and those who are familiar with Islamic movements believe that all Islamic movements and organizations are rooted in Islamic Awakening Movement (IAM) established by Sayyad Jamal ad-Din Asadābādī al-Afghānī (1898–1931) and Muhammed Abduh (1849–1905). Based on the core tenants of the IAM, fighting against colonialism –which had dominated Islamic lands– was the only way to save the Muslims. Therefore, they called for Muslims to unite and put aside their differences and they believed that the best way to fight was returning to Islam and reviving Islamic traditions and values in the lives of all the Muslims¹⁰⁶.

The IAM was initially an enlightenment movement against the objectives of the colonialists. However, in the course of its development it established movements that later on became active in the form of various populations, organizations and parties in all the Islamic territories from Indonesia to the Middle East, to Egypt, to Morocco, with different policies in political and social spheres. Today, in spite of all their differences and conflicts, no Islamic movement can be found that has

¹⁰⁶ Algar H. *Awaking Movement in Islamic World*. Tehran: Enteshr Co., 1981 (Farsi).

not been inspired by Sayed Jamal and Muhammad Abduh's awakening movement in developing its slogans, programs, attitudes and objectives.

The followers of the IAM have pursued the idea of the necessity for Muslims to return to basic principles in the context of different intellectual frameworks. They have used different discourses during the course of their development. These followers have been divided into multiple groups and organizations with their own specific policies and agendas. Different categorizations have been presented to study this vast set of movements. Some, for example, have categorized them in two important Islamic branches of Shiite and Sunni¹⁰⁷. Some others have categorized the Islamic movement based on their fighting policies and call them radical, principlist or conservative. Others put all Islamic movements into two categories of political Islam and fundamental Islam¹⁰⁸.

Another classification in study of Islamic movements, organizations and groups belonging to these movements is based on how they approach their reason to return to Islam. This is a delicate and sensitive argument. Of course a lot of Islamic topics, including Kalam (the science of discourse), have been studied since the emergence of Islam with different approaches and discourses. Islamic Kalam has been presented in discussions of Mu'tazila, Ash'ari, determinism, and indeterminism. However, despite their similarity in expressing their ideas, the final results were inconsistent and contradictory.

The return to Islam is also a category similar to Kalam discussions. One narrative believes that the reason to return to Islam is to solve the problems of Islamic communities and the other one holds the idea that the problems of the Islamic communities can be solved by returning to Islam. Despite the vast similarity of these two narratives, they have actually formed two broad and widespread spectrums in the Islamic world in which extremism can be rooted.

In order to continue our discussion we try to think in a non-restrictive way and call the followers of the first narrative 'Islamists' and dub the followers of the second one as 'extremists'. We should try to investigate their theoretical and intellectual differences and the practical impacts of their thoughts on political and social spheres.

The followers of both narratives can be found in Sunni and Shiite communities. Islamism with a moderate approach exists among both Shiites and Sunnis and therefore it can be argued that extremism – the Salafi movement is an example – can be found in both the Shiite communities (such as the Akhbaris) and the Sunni communities (such as the Wahhabis).

The key fundamental distinction between the first narrative (Islamism) and the second one (extremism) lies in recognition of the power of the human intellect in the face of human miseries and problems and the search for finding solutions in religious teachings (Ijtihad), while the latter argues Islamic beliefs must be extracted from Quran and Sunnah, the same way of the era of Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. According to extremist narratives, religious authorities

¹⁰⁷ Enayat H. *Political Thought in Contemporary Thought*. Tehran: Kharazmi Publication, 1981 (Farsi).

¹⁰⁸ Roy O. *Failure of Political Thought*. Peshawar: Sahar, 1995 (Farsi).

are not allowed to consider reasons other than those found in Quran. In this narrative, styles of reasoning (philosophy and logic) cannot be drawn on as a source to understand the Islamic beliefs.

The roots of legitimating violence and turning it into terrorist acts can be found in this interpretation. In other words, when the power of human intellect to find the truth is disqualified, violence becomes the only way to prove the truth. The fight against terrorism is the same as the fight against violent acting. We have to accept that confronting terrorism without opposing extremist ideas is impossible, that is, terrorism and extremism share the same origins.

Fighting against extremism cannot be successful unless one possesses a thorough understanding of its roots and tenets and compares the extremists' thoughts with those of Islamists (moderate Muslims).

Disparities between Tenets of Islamism and Extremism

Islamism	Extremism
Reason behind return to Islam is to solve the problems of all the Muslim communities.	Return to Islam leads to solve all the problems of Muslim communities.
Islamic Communities have distinct problems. Their Muslims have the responsibility to find solutions based on Islamic doctrines through reason, expediency, and individual and collective wisdom	Muslims have only one problem and that is failure to carry out Divine commandments. Muslims must to unquestioningly fulfil the commandments to solve all the Islamic communities' challenges.
Depending on history, culture and societal structures, politics and governments might differ in the communities. In this regard, Islam does not recommend unique governance for all communities and only instructs Muslims to govern based on justice and fairness.	The only pattern Islam recommends for governance is the one which has a caliph at the helm. Caliphate has superiority over other principles of governance.
The responsibility of Muslims is to establish peace, justice and fairness with a mandate to observe the rights of non-Muslims in the Islamic community.	The responsibility of Muslims is to revive caliphate for the sake of executing the religious commandments.
Muslims have full say in governance and it is a must to modern communities.	The Caliph and obeying his decrees is vital to the community and Muslims' voice has nothing to do with governance.
Regardless of its core (either secular or religious), any state establishes itself within specific boundaries	Islamic state has no lands and borders. Its lands and borders lie in a place where the decrees of Islamic state are enforced.
Loyalty of citizens to their countries is identified.	Loyalty should be aimed for the Islamic state not the country.
Observing the rules of communities is part of everyday life in the contemporary world.	No rules are credible except those of the Islamic state.

Different countries have different constitutions and each and every Muslim living here and holding citizenship rights should respect the national law.	No law but the religious law is identified and Constitutions are not obligatory to Muslims. They should fight for Constitution change and if unsuccessful, they need to leave for another country.
Defence of the country is the duty of every Muslims.	The duty of Muslims is to do jihad for executing the Divine commandments and expanding the Islamic state territories.
The responsibility of Muslims is to promulgate the Religion (the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice).	The responsibility of Muslims is to carry out commandments in community.
Respect of other’s opinions in the Islamic communities is identified.	There is only one true belief and those other than the beliefs of the Caliph and his followers are considered an apostasy.
Democracy is a human achievement for good governance in different communities.	In Islamic governance, democracy is against the decrees of Islam.

Iranian–Russian Cooperation against Extremism in Central Asia

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian countries, various political and social movements emerged in this region, some of which had their roots in the history and culture of these communities and some other were influenced by regional and global trends. Islamic movements, with different names, objectives, strategies, and approaches, are among the most important socio–political movements arising from the collapse of the former Soviet Union in Central Asian countries.

The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Hizb ut–Tahrir (Party of Liberation) can be mentioned as the major Islamic movements in Central Asia. All these movements are currently called “extremist” and “terrorist” by regional states and there is a violent fight against them under way. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was formed following a general peace agreement signed in 1997 between the Tajik government and various opposition groups and put an end to the civil war in this country. This party, which has always had a representative in Tajikistan’s parliament, was accused of participating in the uprising of General Nazarov, the then Deputy of Defence Minister, by the government in 2015 and prosecuted as an extremist and terrorist party.

Without addressing the internal affairs and political structure of countries and the claims raised in this regard, it is merely emphasized here that extremism is definitely a serious threat to countries in this region and their neighbors. The existing experiences and results of extremist actions in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and Iraq acknowledge that regional strategies should be developed for counter–ing extremism and all countries in this region should cooperate with each other and contribute to the furtherance of these strategies. However, this cooperation should be based on clear, precise, and measurable policies.

According to the above table, it can be stated that differentiation between Islamism and extremism, as the main assumption of the present paper, emphasizes that the first and most important step in the fight against extremism is the necessity of separating it from Islam and Islamism. As long as no distinction can be drawn between Islamists and extremists and their thoughts are not clearly separated, it is not possible to fight against extremism, because it is the strategy of extremists to introduce themselves with an Islamic appearance through fungal life and feeding on the body of Islam. Therefore, the first strategic step in the fight against extremism is to deal with their strategy and make a distinction between extremism and Islamism.

Since extremism in Central Asia is considered a threat to interests of Russia and Iran, fighting against extremism in this region is an area of common interest between these two countries. This cooperation can be started with primary and intellectual collaboration and then promoted to higher levels. The point in cooperation between Iran and Russia in the fight against extremism in Central Asia is that the hard security issues are not raised first and the security definitions of such organizations and parties provided by intelligence and security agencies in the region are not considered the criteria for action, but these movements and their organizational structures are recognized with an analytic approach and a distinction is made between extremism and Islamism. In this approach, moderate Islamism, which has been formed in the cultural and historical context of countries in Central Asia, is considered the most important element of stability and tranquility in the region and also the main power opposing extremism.

This approach indicates that politicization and securitization of political opposition and dealing with them under the title of fight against extremism not only will not be a successful strategy but also itself can exacerbate extremism. Thus, it is necessary to understand the conditions of time and, by recognizing the natural rights of people, including religious freedom, allow Muslim people of these countries enjoy their rights in performing religious practices and also isolate extremists by strengthening moderate movements.

Another important point that should be noted here is that most Muslims in Iran, Russia, and Central Asian countries follow two different branches of Islam (Sunni and Shia) and this difference in religion must be addressed in the quality of cooperation between Iran and Russia against extremism. Failure in taking this issue into account can be problematic for both sides and leads to different interpretations of the reality of the fight against extremism. For instance, it may be wrongly advertised that Shias allied with Orthodox Christians against Sunnis, which is detrimental to both sides. Hence, the purpose of this cooperation against extremism should be clearly explained to all and actions should be based on complete accuracy and enlightenment. That is why the theoretical aspects of Iran–Russia cooperation in the fight against terrorism are emphasized in the first step.

One of the noteworthy measures taken in this regard in Russia is the formation of the Russia–Islamic World Strategic Vision Group in 2006 initiated by the late Yevgeny Primakov, the former Russian Prime Minister, and Mintimer Shaimiev, the then President of Tatarstan. Concurrent with Russia’s accession to the Orga-

nization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as an observer member, activities of this group began which included various meetings in Moscow, Kazan, Istanbul, Jeddah, and Kuwait attended by 30 prominent religious scholars, political figures, and journalists from various Islamic countries, namely Iran, Indonesia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Started with the opening message of Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, different topics related to the Muslim world and Russia have been discussed in these meetings.

Meetings of this group stopped following the events in the Arab world known as “Arab Spring”. However, in 2014, President Putin decided to revive the group and appointed Rustam Minnikhanov, the President of Tatarstan, as its head. In the new round of activities, two meetings were held by this group on extremism attended by journalists and the media professionals from Islamic countries.

As one of the participants in both meetings, in addition to acknowledging the importance and necessity of such meetings, I believe that more serious measures should be taken in the fight against terrorism. The above-mentioned meetings were mostly focused on the furtherance of general and media policy of Russia in the Muslim world, the threat of extremism is to Russia in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the fact that these areas are closer to Russia than to the Middle East. Hence, Arab countries cannot help Russia in this regard and thus the Islamic Republic of Iran could be Russia’s main strategic ally in the fight against extremism.

Conclusion

Extremism is a serious threat to all of Central Asia and its neighboring states, namely Iran and Russia. In this regard, the fight against the threat of extremism is of utmost importance to the security of regional states namely Iran and Russia. However, before action is taken against extremism, it is necessary to draw a distinction between extremism and Islamism, due to the fact that extremist groups assume and propagate the idea that their principles are drawn from Islam. Therefore, if we cannot distinguish extremism from Islamism, the battle against extremism would be in vain. Simultaneously, as some Central Asian authorities label the political opposition ‘extremists’, it is essential to put this controversial approach into consideration. Given Iranian–Russian common interests and understanding of threats in Central Asia, a sort of actions, and soft attempts in particular, to fight against extremism in Central Asia is recommended to both Iranian and Russian authorities.

Section III. Russia–Iran Cooperation on Afghanistan and Central Asia

Topic 7. Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Afghanistan: Possibilities and Constraints

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Afghanistan has historically been a zone of exclusive interests for both Russia, whose history is filled with fruitful cooperation and good neighbourly relations with the Afghan people,¹⁰⁹ and for Iran, which shares a state border with its eastern neighbour, as well as a number of many civilizational features. The profound political and socioeconomic crisis and the permanent military–political conflict that has riven Afghan society for decades, pose a regional geopolitical problem. While dealing with internal disputes and conflicts is the main priority and prerogative of the socio–political forces and people of Afghanistan, reacting to their external consequences that spread beyond its territory has placed a heavy burden on the neighbouring states and has formed the basis of the regional security system in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

It is true that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, which began in 2001, and the withdrawal of a significant portion of the U.S.–led NATO contingent from Afghanistan in 2014 brought about serious changes to the region.¹¹⁰ But the situation remains in many ways uncertain and unstable. The combination of old and new challenges and threats emanating from the military–political crisis in Afghanistan largely determine the design and characteristics of international relations in Central and Southern Asia. The perception of the “Afghan problem” and the principles and mechanisms for the leading regional actors – notably the Russian Federation and Iran – to resolve it are crucial in many ways. This article attempts to answer the pressing questions that arise in this context: how do Russia and Iran see the threats coming from Afghanistan? How can Moscow and Teheran influence the situation? Is cooperation with third countries on the issue possible?

For many years, Russia and Iran have pledged and delivered support to the central government of Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai (2002–2014) and Sharif Ghani (since 2014). Both states want the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty under a legitimate parliament and government which fully control, and are responsible for, the country’s territory.

Until recently, however, these two countries have placed an emphasis on different aspects of Afghanistan’s sovereignty. Thus, while Teheran has flatly rejected any foreign presence in Afghanistan, both throughout the presence of ISAF and until

¹⁰⁹ For more on the history of Russia–Afghan relations, see: Korgun V.G. *Russia and Afghanistan: Historical Ways of Forming Russia’s Image in Afghanistan*. Moscow: Librokom, 2009, 320 p. (in Russian).

¹¹⁰ Arunova M.R., Ivanenko V.I. *U.S. Afghan Policy 1945–2014*. Moscow: Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 198–208 (in Russian).

today, Moscow took a more reticent stand.¹¹¹ Refraining from value judgements on any issue other than the fight against terror and drug trafficking, the Russian political establishment used the U.S. military presence pragmatically to pursue its own goals in Afghanistan (the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda) and in the region as a whole (military–political integration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organization).

At the same time, Russian officials at various levels have repeatedly expressed a readiness to develop partnership relations with any agents to address the common problems and threats in Afghanistan and Central Asia, such as the production and transport of narcotics, the activities of international terrorist groups, and ensuring food and environmental security. Although these initiatives often did not elicit any response from the United States and NATO, Russia has remained committed to its declared principles and has made some progress in these areas in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO),¹¹² a fact that has not been lost on Iran. Exchange of experience in fighting extremism and terrorism, as well as cooperation in this sphere between government structures in Iran and Russia – bilaterally or within the SCO Regional Anti–Terrorist Structure – takes on added significance due to the increased threat of radical Islam in Afghanistan after DAESH cells began springing up on its territory.

The worsening of the relations between Russia and the West in 2014–15 brought the Russian position closer to that of Iran. Thus, Moscow no longer derived any benefit from the constant military presence of U.S. and NATO forces close to its borders and the zone of its vital interests (i.e. Central Asia). Meanwhile, the remaining challenges of Islamic terrorism, drug trafficking and environmental, food and migration security are equally important for Russia and Iran, which motivates expanded and deepening bilateral cooperation and interaction in a whole range of areas.

Both Moscow and Teheran consider a victory of the Taliban in its ongoing civil war against the current regime in Afghanistan to be unacceptable. The readiness of both states to recognize the Taliban as a party to the political process is a forced concession prompted by the realization that the use of exclusively military means to resolve the existing crisis is futile, and does not mean that they agree to deal with a revived Islamic Emirate of the Taliban as a legitimate government of Afghanistan. Although the military threat posed by the Taliban to the territories of Russia and Iran is more imagined than real, the restoration of the regime that was crushed in 2001 could contribute to the further spread of the infrastructure of international Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan.¹¹³ This is a scenario that can destabilize the situation in Central Asia, as well as on Russia's southern brooders and in Iran's border areas.¹¹⁴ The threat is posed not only by terrorism, but also by

¹¹¹ Barzegar K. Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Taliban Afghanistan // *The Washington Quarterly*. 2014. Vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 124–127.

¹¹² Nikitina Y.A. CSTO and SCO: Models of Regionalism in Security. Moscow: Navona, 2009, pp. 47–60, 88–98 (in Russian).

¹¹³ These conclusions were made as a result of discussions held under the auspices of the Russian International Affairs Council as part of the roundtable entitled "Development of the Situation in Afghanistan 2016" (Moscow, April 18, 2016).

¹¹⁴ Kazantsev A. Afghanistan after 2014 // *RIAC*, May 16, 2016 (in Russian).

uncontrolled migration, a new wave of “drugs export,” a worsening of the crime situation in the neighbouring states (especially the border areas) in the short term and the total exclusion of Afghanistan from the regional political and economic system for many years to come.

Even so, the security problem, which appears to be of paramount importance, does not cover the entire sphere of the two countries’ interests in Afghanistan. No less important is the economic sphere, in which both countries look at Afghanistan from at least two angles.

First, Russia and Iran see Afghanistan as a market for exports. Naturally, the scale of Iran–Afghanistan cooperation in this field is far greater than that between Russia and Afghanistan, though the structure of export differs. Iran’s primary exports to Afghanistan are fuel and energy, including petroleum processing products. Russia can currently offer mostly military products. In the long term, exports can be expanded to include agricultural produce and electricity (jointly with Central Asian partners). Thus, Iranian and Russian goods do not compete in the Afghanistan market; both countries are interested in seeing the market grow and develop.

Secondly, both Russia and Iran see Afghanistan as a transit country in the system of regional and inter–regional trade. Afghanistan’s geographical position makes it an indispensable part of trade exchanges between the East and the West on the one hand, and the North and the South on the other. Direct routes linking Iran, China, Central Asia (whose transport infrastructure is oriented towards Russia) and South Asia pass through Afghanistan. The Iranian leadership under Rahbar Ali Khamenei sees its country’s future in the light of its grand “Looking East” development strategy in which Afghanistan is assigned a special place. In a way, the concept is related to the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt project which, among other things, shapes the Chinese vision of future cooperation with Iran in the field of energy and goods trade. These relations have continued to develop throughout the period of sanctions against Iran and are set to grow stronger. Thus, pipelines can be laid across Afghan territory to carry Iranian oil and gas to China and to Central and South Asian countries. The most important challenge facing Russia is to establish transit relations with India (as a key BRICS partner), and in the near future with the SCO across the territory of Central Asia and Afghanistan, in order to diversify and increase bilateral trade by bringing in members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

There are a number of objective obstacles to the full use of the potential of bilateral cooperation between Iran and Russia in Afghanistan. For example, the two countries do not have any experience of cooperating in those economic areas where such cooperation is possible. Besides, because of the complicated military–political situation in the country, most of its territory is characterized by a high risk of insurgency, local crime and terrorist cells, thus making it impossible for Russian companies to do business. By contrast, Iranian businesses invest close to the Iran–Afghanistan border (mainly in the Herat, Farah and Nimroz provinces), where the local pro–Iranian Shiite and Tajik population ensures a sufficient level of security. For Iran, investing in the rehabilitation of these parts of Afghanistan constitutes a long–term investment in the development of production capacity on

its own territory and in strengthening security on its eastern borders.¹¹⁵ By building up cooperation with the border areas of Afghanistan, Iran does not just create jobs on its own periphery, but secures a market for its goods and services. Russia does not at present have such exclusive zones and opportunities in Afghanistan, which increases the risks, involved in independent economic activity many times over, considering lack of stability and the weakness of the state and the central government as the preferred Russian partner in the country.

The United States, China, India and Pakistan – the most involved external parties to the Afghan conflict – have serious instruments for influencing the situation in Afghanistan. However, while cooperation with the United States over Afghanistan is limited for Iran and Russia in the medium term because of the overall negative background created by developments in Ukraine and Syria, the mood both in Moscow and Teheran concerning the prospects of interaction with other powers is fairly upbeat.¹¹⁶

Pakistan wields influence over those segments of the Afghan political elite – both government and anti-government – with which Iran and Russia have for various reasons failed to find a common language, something that must be done if they are to achieve their declared goals. Islamabad remains the key economic partner of Kabul while at the same time continuing to show an interest in integration and mutually beneficial interaction with the countries in the region within the SCO structure. The persisting tensions between India and Pakistan remain a powerful destabilizing factor in and outside South Asia. While Iran has experience of interacting with Pakistan in economics, regional politics and security (including energy security), the links between Islamabad and Moscow are confined to intelligence and military structures and a limited trade and economic agenda.

India is interested in peace in Afghanistan and the elimination of the “Islamist threat” emanating from the zone of instability in Pashtunistan on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For India, the economic agenda is secondary, which makes it similar to Russia in many ways as it is interested in forging effective alliances of states to resolve the “Afghan problem” by available means and methods. Russia–India relations have a solid foundation, which holds out a promise of further development, whereas cooperation between India and Iran runs into numerous obstacles. Therefore, successful cooperation between Russia and Iran with regard to Afghanistan may either be used to mend fences between Teheran and Delhi, with Moscow as the mediator, or it may breed mistrust on the part of India if it feels that the rapprochement between Russia and Iran does not meet its interests.

Russia, Iran and Pakistan are no match for China, India and the United States in terms of economic might. But they have experience of, and instruments for, dealing with security issues, which form the core of the Afghan problem. Russia and

¹¹⁵ Kutty S. N. *Iran's Continuing Interests in Afghanistan* // *The Washington Quarterly*, 2014. Vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 146–149.

¹¹⁶ Destradi S. *Regional Powers and Security Governance: ISAF Withdrawal, Regional Competition, and Domestic Norms in India Afghanistan Policy* // *Asian Perspective*, 2014, No. 38, pp. 565–587.

Iran can complement each other, compensating for the weaknesses of the other partner in the pursuit of common goals.

Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which has experience and authority in organizing the negotiating process in Syria and which is an important participant and initiator of regional integration initiatives (CSTO, SCO) and their military component, together with Iran, which has historical, ethno-linguistic and religious ties with Afghanistan and, at this time, greater political and economic presence on its territory, have the capacity to cooperate to mutual advantage in overcoming the key threats generated by the Afghan crisis.

Security is undoubtedly the quintessence of the “Afghan” interests of Russia and Iran as partners in bilateral cooperation and members of regional interstate associations and organizations. The problem of security lies at the root of any future plan for the development of Afghanistan, as well as of foreign participation or assistance in such development in pursuit of their own national interests in the region. The continuing armed conflict between the Kabul government and the Taliban is a long way from being resolved in spite of the split within the Taliban camp, which helps maintain a high level of insecurity inside the country and spreads instability beyond its borders. Thus, the need for developing and intensifying bilateral cooperation in this area is objectively relevant to Russia and Iran because they depend on, and are interested in, a prosperous, united and sovereign Afghanistan.

Fresh efforts to coordinate and institutionalize joint actions in the region may give an impetus to intensified bilateral contacts with regard to Afghanistan. It is necessary both on a bilateral basis and within the SCO to intensify contacts between Russian and Iranian representatives in a whole range of areas in order to determine the prospects for cooperation, not only at the strategic, but also at the tactical level. In doing so, it is necessary to distinguish two areas of interaction: cooperation in countering the threats emanating from Afghanistan (drug trafficking, terrorism, uncontrolled illegal migration, etc.) and promoting reconciliation inside Afghanistan. In the medium term, Russia’s economic leverage is fairly limited, and its economic interests in Afghanistan are uncertain. This offers extra opportunities and removes certain limitations for other regional actors in building constructive relations with Iran in the medium term. Iran’s economic presence in Afghanistan meets Russia’s interests and may help the latter achieve its own strategic goals. The issue of assisting the restoration of Afghanistan is relevant, while Iran’s experience in that field is interesting and useful for Russia – though it is still secondary because it hinges on the solution of political and military problems. Not being rivals, but sharing common goals, Russia and Iran have a chance to realize the mutual benefit of bilateral cooperation in Afghanistan by improving the system of reacting to security threats, agreeing and coordinating actions to shore up and restore Afghanistan and develop the regional security and cooperation architecture.

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Introduction

In recent decades, political entities, along with accepting the globalization of existence methods in the international arena, have attempted to redefine their interests and identities within regional frameworks. These new cooperative trends in regions are frequently interpreted within the context of New Regionalism Theories. The concept of new regionalism has provided an appropriate ground for forming various layers of regional cooperation in an independent framework, separated from global trends and based on two elements, ‘thematic openness’ and ‘geographical flexibility’.

This article sets about addressing the question by looking at the Iranian–Russian relationship and the role of new regionalism in drawing both states closer to cooperate in Afghanistan. The analysis focuses on a question that has been central to the debate: How Iran and Russia could cooperate closely in establishing peace and security in Eurasia and Afghanistan in particular. This article will argue that based on new regionalism theories, Iran and Russia, despite a diversity of interests, can come to a common definition of identities and norms for establishing stability and security in Afghanistan. The result would be a closer cooperation on resolving regional conflicts and promoting shared interests in the region.

New Regionalism Theory

Regionalism is not a new concept in the literature of international relations. It has a life of at least five decades in contemporary history. However, different perceptions and interpretations have been presented for the concept in different eras, each of which reflects some truth, about the governing structure of the international system in any particular era. Without any doubt, macro–level attention to the relationships between political units in the international stage is one of the most important barriers in developing cooperation and convergence among these units at a regional level within the framework of classical regionalism. Moreover, since countries cannot have different places at any particular time, like billiard balls, due to the fact that they are dependent on the geographical areas in which they exist. Therefore, they do not have the option to join various regional arrangements. Thus, this could be seen as a barrier to regionalism which in turn, it should be noted, has led to the majority of the animosities and battles in the history among neighboring countries. Hence, countries have often tried to help great powers which are far off in order to move away from the harm of their own powerful neighbors.

From another perspective or approach, hostility or animosity among neighbors in every region can itself prepare the grounds for cooperation. History bears witness to the fact that when economic interests and national peace and prosperity become important, countries seek to identify and recognize the benefits of each other. Therefore, competition in the framework of coexistence characterizes the relationship rather than the search for enmity, war and destruction. They come to believe that the damages of war are too heavy and expensive and thus they try to avoid it as much as possible from the outset. This pragmatic approach to cooperation for achieving collective security and protection of the interests of regional actors is the first step toward convergence and regionalism as a bridge between

two study levels of micro (including political units) and macro (including international structures) regionalism. In fact, regionalism has helped to increase and boost regional security. Moreover, this perception from regionalism has offered a form of independence to countries in opposition to the concept of globalization and their absorption into it.

Since the 1990s and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new approach came into existence and new arrangements in the framework of the “new regionalism” concept have been made in this field of study.

The new approach to regionalism, more than anything else, emphasizes the characteristics of ‘openness of definition for the concept of region’ and its different ‘layers’. Therefore, not only countries are less involved and bound in ideological arrangements for their joining or separation, but also geography is regarded as a relative term. It can then be seen that there are countries which have joined regional organizations outside their regions. Definition of the concept of region has become more flexible and various forms of regionalism, regional organizations and institutions can be created on the basis of the interests of the countries brought together in one geographical region. Therefore, even the two processes of globalization and unipolarism have not been able to prevent regionalism and even sometimes, on the contrary, have helped to forge it. In fact, in the new order, the entire world has been globally regional rather than moving toward unipolar and/or multipolar in the macro-level of the international system. Moreover, although powerful political units have their own roles and particular functions, regional actors have also found a stage to show themselves.

This new kind of regionalism, as informed, has constructed identities and norms within the framework of institution-building. In this new discourse, sometimes multiple identities have been defined in a geographical area and have overlapped with each other. Subsequently, several layers of regionalism could be formed simultaneously with different functions while each country defines its regional relations according to its needs and interests in one or more layers. Consequently, a ‘region’ is what we perceive and thus is not necessarily what is defined on the map and/or based on mere strategic considerations. Therefore, although geography is still an important factor, this element has become more flexible and can be portrayed as a new element based on the need, identity and interests of a country, each time.

New Regionalism: A Framework for Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Afghanistan

The Iranian and Russian Empires have been collaborating and interacting with each other for more than five centuries. Moreover, their relationship has had its ups and downs. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s together with the formation of The Russian Federation created an opportunity for new relations between the two countries. This event, along with some regional and international changes, has paved the way for a relationship based on cooperation.

Although contact between Iran and Russia in various fields seemed friendly over the past twenty-five years, a stable collaborative dialogue was never formed

between them at a regional level due to each party's definition of interests, framework, and forming structures.

Russia and Iran are considered the owners of substantial oil and gas reserves in the economic arena which would give them a competitive advantage in energy markets. However, even competing in the field of energy pipelines from the Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the international markets, and building regional trade routes, reminiscent of the Silk Road's time of prosperity, have not paved the way for regional economic collaboration between the two.

Needless to say, Russia would certainly want to continue its military superiority in the peripheral regions. In recent years, Iran's access to advanced weapons was limited due to the rising tension between Iran and powerful Western governments; thus, the Iranians had to use domestically produced armaments and Russian or Chinese arms. The Russians also would want to continue their military collaboration with Iran and maintain selling armaments to the Iranians. However, this collaboration has not yet expanded military arrangements between the two at a regional level.

Moreover, there has not been much collaboration in terms of cultural and ideological issues between the two neighboring states in the recent years. Despite challenges and problems, Iran and Russia still have common interests at the regional and extra-regional levels which would provide them with an opportunity to work together.

One of the main incentives for their partnership would reveal itself in Russia's approach for establishing a multilateral structure at an international level. After the collapse of the Soviet Union followed by changes in structure of the international system, Russia once again attempted to define its superiority in a new framework in order to acquire its former position in the international system by pursuing ideas such as Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism. Russia's attempt for maintaining its authoritative presence in a region dubbed as 'Near Abroad', the newly independent republics, indicates the pursuit of such policies by the Kremlin.

Iran has always followed a confrontational approach towards the West over the past decades and therefore can be considered a reliable peer. Iran's and Russia's belief in the necessity of establishing an international system based on multilateralism and also their common belief in countering the West's attempts to establish its superiority have led them to collaborate at the level of regional institutions. Based on this new approach, all the global and regional powers would try to resolve common problems by following an agreed-upon framework in a noncompeting and collaborative way. In fact, the common threats against the interests of the two at a regional level have made them work together. Examples of such threats can be seen in the Enlargement Policy of the North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO), continued since 1993.

Moreover, the existence of intra-regional threats like the establishment of religious extremist groups such as the Taliban, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and drug trafficking mafia causing insecurity and instability along and within the borders of Central Asian countries and the Caucasus, would bring the two coun-

tries closer in terms of their regional positions and joint attempt for finding a solution to handle these crises.

Joint collaboration in resolving the regional crises in countries such as Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Afghanistan is an indicative example of Iranian–Russian partnership. Moreover, the two countries' collaborative efforts to prevent the promotion of ethnic and religious separatist demands in the region are important parts of this collaboration.

Therefore, the geopolitical pragmatism and the definition of identity and norms governing the foreign policy of the two countries in the international relations would make them work together in regard to both regional and extra-regional affairs.

Afghanistan is a familiar territory for Iran and Russia. The cultural, historical, and identity ties between the Iranians and the Afghans have created such unity between the two nations for thousands of years that sometimes they can be hardly distinguished from each other. The Russians in the contemporary era and during the establishment of the communist government in Kabul in particular, have had a strong presence in the Afghan society, and therefore played an important role in shaping the society's political structures as well as its transition towards modern institutions and structures.

Although it was expected that after the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Iran and Russia would play a vital role in organizing the new political regime, their presence brought about several distinct attempts in some areas and not in the form of a regional collaboration.

In fact, in the post-Taliban period, the countries that were not directly involved in the conflict with the fundamentalist extremist groups could hardly participate in Afghanistan since the Taliban was removed from power by the help of NATO and the US-led coalition forces. Although Iran and Russia considered the Taliban their enemy and were indirectly cooperating with the international coalition groups, the new government in Kabul failed to cooperate effectively with the two countries. Furthermore, the United States and its allies were not welcoming towards other regional and international powers in Afghanistan. As a result, Russia which sought to establish military bases in Afghanistan in order to help generate security and stability, especially in the northern parts of it, failed to obtain a good relationship with Karzai's government. Consequently, since the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were implementing security in Afghanistan for more than a decade, Russian merchants and investors did not trust the Afghan markets for investing or trading; therefore, they are now playing a minor role in Afghanistan's economic structure.

At the same time, Iran which has formally and repeatedly called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, could not establish a collaborative relationship with the international groups on the Afghan soil. Moreover, Iranian goods gained a favorable position in the Afghan markets due to the vicinity, presence of millions of Afghans in Iran, and the cost-effectiveness of exporting these goods to Afghan cities for both sides. This turned Iran into one of the main exporters of

consumer goods and energy to Afghan cities; however, Iran could not acquire a favorable position in the long-term investment of Afghanistan's key industries. In the current years, China is considered the major exporter of goods to Afghan markets and India is also regarded as one of the major investors in various industrial sectors of Afghanistan.

Furthermore, parts of Afghanistan turned into utopia for extremist and fundamentalist groups because of the growing tensions in the region and the continuous insecurity in the country caused by the emergence of extremist Islamic groups like ISIS. This is a serious security threat for Iran and Russia. Both states have always tried to communicate with the Afghan government and some branches of Taliban to prevent ISIS from infiltrating into the Central Asia as well as their own territories. However, the political authorities in Kabul believe that Iran and Russia could cause further regional instability and weaken the Afghan government against the extremist groups. Moreover, Kabul demands that regional and international powers support the country's legitimate government in defeating the extremist and terrorist groups.

Afghan authorities believe that fundamentalism in Afghanistan had more to do with the economic difficulties and way of life along with the existing deprivation in various remote urban and rural regions than any ideological reasons. According to their argument, the best way to weaken the fundamentalist groups is by raising the quality of life of Afghans. Therefore, investing in various sectors of the country's economy and increasing employment and income could help to create political stability, economic growth and also increase social security in the fragile Afghan nation.

Iran and Russia, as two powerful countries in the area of regional cooperation at the Eurasian level, certainly can play an important role in the development of Afghanistan's economy in an effort to stabilize the country. This could happen either by tripartite cooperation or within a new cooperative framework with the help of countries such as India and Kazakhstan resulting in several benefits: first, increasing the stability and security of the region; second, the long-term benefits of the economic sectors from the investment in Afghanistan; and third, this cooperation is in line with the identity and nature of these countries' foreign policy that seek to establish a multipolar international system. Therefore, cooperation with Afghanistan in the economic area as well as strengthening its government against the extremist groups could be effective in increasing stability and regional security as well as securing the national interests of Iran and Russia in both aspects.

Conclusion

It might have been expected that a 'New Great Game' would develop in post-Soviet Eurasia in which not only global powers but the regional ones, namely China, Iran, Turkey, Russia and India would vie with each other for greater influence in the newly independent states of Central Asia. While a lighter version of such new great game has played in the region, it is, indeed, not that much 'great' as had been expected. Instead of rivalry, the regional states have attempted to

stabilize these newly independent states aimed at territorial security at home and institution-building abroad.

At the turn of century, with respect to common considerations in their foreign policies, Iran and Russia definitively proved that both states are seeking cooperation rather than rivalry and hostility. From the Iranian perspective, Russia is a strategically capable actor enjoying a powerful seat in the United Nations (UN), supplier of a part of Iranian military equipment and among the major states implementing the Joint comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). To Russian decision makers, Iran is regional power holding many cards in the region. In that regard, Moscow requires Tehran partnership within the regional arrangements in order to take both benefit of Iran's capabilities in the region and contain the possible damage it could render to Russia's regional interests.

In sum, this regional interdependence developed from regional institution/organization establishments is clearly demonstrating the conciliatory approach of the powerful states in Eurasia for the sake of collective interests and security. It goes without saying that cooperation for the expansion of security in the region after US-led forces left Afghanistan in 2014 can also cultivate another field for regional integration among Iran, Russia and other neighboring states of Afghanistan.

Topic 8. Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Central Asia: Possibilities and Constraints

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Since 1979, Iran's conceptual objective to evolve as the leading nation of the Middle East (and the whole of Central Asia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union) that underpins the country's foreign policy strategy has been perceived as a priority and ultimate goal for fulfilling the historic mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, over time, the means and methods of implementing this plan, as well as the understanding of its scope, have undergone a noticeable evolution. By the 2000s, several paradigms of the previous two decades had been synthesized within this concept: achieving the status of a regional power (the doctrine of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran), maximum pragmatism in the national economy (a concept put forward by President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) and consistent integration into the global economy (the ideas of President Mohammad Khatami).

However, the growing antagonism in Iran's relationship with the United States in many respects predetermined new changes in the nature of Iran's policy in the region. Iran's tactical priorities in Central Asia were aimed at avoiding conflicts and cautiously assert the country's presence in various areas, primarily in the economy, education, culture – at a modest scale, albeit steadily, while facilitating efforts to overcome or, sometimes, prevent the country's foreign political and economic isolation. These objectives became relevant again as soon as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was signed in 2015, although it would be premature to speak about any breakthroughs in Iran's engagement with the countries of the region.

Central Asia is the strategic rear for Iran, given that the country's main foreign political and economic activities are directed away from it. Therefore, the ideological component – the notorious idea of the “export of the Islamic revolution” that caused alarmism in the early 1990s – has never evolved into anything significant and only refers to attempts to reintegrate the region in the historical context. For Iran, all of the existing and newly emerging contradictions associated with the strengthening of strategic rivalry in the Central Asian region as a whole are based upon geopolitical and geo-economic considerations, rather than ideology. The history of post-Soviet Central Asia has many examples of numerous countries – Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, as well as Muslim regions of the Russian Federation and China – seeking to influence the religious domain; however, Iran, with its Shia doctrine (which is unacceptable in the region), where the Sunni madhhab dominates, is clearly not one of them.¹¹⁷

Iran's economic policy in the region over the past 25 years can be characterized as thoroughly restrained, with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan being the only exceptions due to their geographic location and ethno-cultural proximity, respectively. Overall, amid the multidimensional nature of foreign policy stratagems of all the

¹¹⁷ Knyazev A. Iran's Regional Strategy in Central Asia: Evolution and Priorities. URL: http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/69322/Regionalnaya_strategiya_Irana_v_Centralnoy_Azii_evolyuciya_i_prioritety (in Russian).

countries in the region, it is the reluctance to confront the United States and western countries that most likely served as the main inhibitor.

The modern history of the region has been free of a fundamental and antagonistic rivalry between Iran and Russia. However, there are quite few positive examples of engagement. Yevgeny Primakov pointed to the fact that back at the initial phase of the Russia–Iran contacts concerning the Tajik issue, it became clear that the strengthening of Iran’s positions in Tajikistan was hopeless, and Iran’s influence – and even its “physical presence” in Tajikistan – had decreased. With regard to its overall strategy, it was concluded that Iran sought to pull itself out of isolation and “be involved in positive processes in the international scene.”¹¹⁸ The experience of that period to a great extent determined the format of Russia–Iran relations on Tajikistan and made direct confrontation of the two countries’ interests increasingly unlikely. The essence of that experience consisted mainly in the fact that the Iranian side recognized the priority of Russia’s influence in the military and political sphere. In terms of direct involvement in the economy of the Republic of Tajikistan, however, both Russia and Iran restricted themselves to separate projects that did not compete with each other, and eventually yielded the leading positions to Chinese companies.¹¹⁹

Several studies have noted that competition between Russia and Iran, including in Central Asia, is linked to the fact that the structure of the two countries’ economies are similar, focusing on energy exports.¹²⁰ However, transformations in the global system of international relations, which have been taking place beyond the regional level, are capable, albeit at this point theoretically, of removing this competitiveness. It was during the President of the Russian Federation’s visit to Tehran for a meeting of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) that a \$5 billion export loan for Iran was announced in order to implement “industrial cooperation,” which envisages 35 priority projects in power engineering, construction, sea terminals, electrification, etc.¹²¹ The implementation of such a programme, which does not directly involve the countries of Central Asia, would nevertheless have enough potential to seriously change the landscape of the bilateral relationship, not to mention the entire Middle East and Central Asia. Cooperation of this kind would constitute a serious claim on the part of Moscow and Tehran to reformat the entire Asian energy market and transport infrastructure in both bilateral engagement and multilateral interests.¹²² This naturally increases the relevance of the regional security issue and implies an urgent need to upgrade military cooperation between Iran and Russia to a completely new level, including in Central Asia.

In the context of Central Asia, this cooperation can be conventionally divided into three conflict nodes of various levels of development, all of which cause concerns

¹¹⁸ On Y.M. Primakov’s Stay in Kabul and Tehran // Diplomatic Bulletin. Moscow, 1993. No. 15–16, p. 65 (in Russian).

¹¹⁹ These include, for example, Tajikistan’s energy market: the construction and operation of Sangtuda 1 Hydroelectric Power Plant by Russian energy companies, and the construction of Sangtuda 2 by Iranian companies.

¹²⁰ Zviagelskaya I. Seeking Points of Support: Iran in Central Asia.
 URL: http://www.russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=4757#top-content

¹²¹ Knyazev A. Tehran 2015 Draws the Contours of a New Middle East Involving Moscow.
 URL: http://www.ng.ru/world/2015-11-26/3_kartblansh.html (in Russian).

¹²² Ibid.

in both Moscow and Tehran: the complex issue of Afghanistan; the preservation and maintenance of sustainable long-term stability in the Caspian Sea; and the spread of religious extremism and terrorism across the region, which disturbs Tehran at least as much as it does Moscow.

Unlike Moscow, whose policy on Afghanistan has been mostly of a contextual nature, Tehran has developed a systemic policy with regard to the country, which comprises two key priorities: ensuring national security in all of its components; and the status of the Shia community in Afghanistan. In turn, ensuring national security includes a long list of activities undertaken by Iran, from the highly effective fight against drug trafficking to investment in the neighbouring provinces of Herat and Farah, as well as the predominantly Shia provinces of Bamyan, Daykundi and Ghor; and from direct (at times military) support for at least two Afghan ethno-political groups to political work with any government in Kabul.¹²³ The interests of Russia and Iran coincide on all of these issues, and cooperation in the above areas could become the best mechanism to counter common threats.

Nevertheless, regular bilateral cooperation between the two countries in regional security appears to be a half-measure: Central Asia and the neighbouring countries of the Middle East call for a comprehensive security system; however, neither the geographically limited Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), nor multiple intergovernmental bilateral contractual relationships can effectively meet their demand. One thing remains unchanged: “Iran acknowledges Russia’s leadership in the region, based upon the fact that only a strong Russia can serve as a guarantor of the balance of interests of various countries in Central Asia.”¹²⁴

For both Moscow and Tehran the main obstacle to enhanced cooperation, not to mention the establishment of a full-scale geopolitical axis, is the close intertwinement between the issues of strategic partnership and internal political struggle (which is characteristic of both countries). This struggle is theoretically between Western-oriented economic elites on the one hand, and the part of the elites that pursue the national interests of their respective countries on the other. The main foreign political obstacles to the establishment of the Moscow–Tehran axis can be divided into regional obstacles and international obstacles. A strategic partnership between Iran and Russia is naturally a highly undesirable factor of international relations for the West, and consequently, efforts are made to encourage internal political struggle against this partnership. The pro-western lobbies in both Moscow and Tehran have a significant resource of influence. Their activities may disrupt numerous economic and political partnership projects, as well as a number of agreements reached between the administrations of the two countries. It is important to acknowledge that a significant portion of Russia’s political elite appears to be jealous of Iran’s growing influence in the region, and this does not contribute to the promotion of mutual trust. There are sufficient numbers of regional entities that believe the emergence of such an axis would be extremely negative.

¹²³ Tajik Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic Society) and Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan).

¹²⁴ Sanaei M. *Iran’s Relations with Central Asian CIS countries. Sociopolitical and Economic Aspects*. Moscow, 2002, p. 128 (in Russian).

Azerbaijan and, to a lesser degree, Turkmenistan, are the most vocal opponents of the emerging Moscow–Tehran axis, for various political and economic reasons. The dominance of the Irani–Russia alliance in the Caspian Sea and the adjacent regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia would give these two countries far less room for manoeuvre in their relationships with the West in various areas, including military and energy.

Kazakhstan, which is part of the Customs Union, the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO alongside Russia – and which has grown increasingly active in many dimensions following the lifting of sanctions against Iran – would probably tolerate such an “axis” more. However, the agenda for the visit of the president of Kazakhstan to Tehran in April 2016 comprised exclusively economic issues; the visit was deliberately free from any political discourse, which can serve as indirect evidence that Astana is unwilling to irritate the West unnecessarily.

Iran’s relations with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are even more restrained. Iranian small and medium-sized businesses have been operating rather successfully in Kyrgyzstan, where the legislation is quite liberal; however, business relations are limited to these contacts between SMEs. The level of political relations can be characterized as purely formal, burdened at various times by series of negative episodes associated, among other things, with the persistent U.S. influence in Kyrgyzstan.

The low-profile nature of Iran’s relationship with Uzbekistan has different motives. The main reasons behind this are to a great extent subjective: the bilateral relations that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR have been affected by the complete and continued rejection of political Islam, which underpins Iran’s political system. Since the early 1990s, this rift has to a great extent dictated the policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Iran.¹²⁵ In April 2011, the governments of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar signed an agreement on the establishment of the Central Asia–Persian Gulf transport corridor. In August 2014, its signatories (with the exception of Qatar) signed a memorandum on the agreement coming into effect, and then Kazakhstan acceded to it. The transport and transit corridor is designed to incorporate a railway connecting Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, as well as a shipping route from the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar to the seaports of Omani.¹²⁶ This project mostly interests Tashkent, enabling it to seriously diversify its ties with external markets while remaining in line with Uzbekistan’s strategic objective – balanced engagement with all foreign agents.

Because of its ethnic and cultural similarity, Tajikistan has earned a special place in Iran’s regional policy while remaining a strategic partner of Russia’s (just as all the other countries of the region, except for Turkmenistan). The work of Iran and Russia on the Inter–Tajik Dialogue in the early 1990s became a compatibility

¹²⁵ In the late 1990s, Iran cooperated quite closely with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which irritated Tashkent. Tehran’s work with the movement was an attempt to “pry” the IMU from the influence of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey, but such tactics caused serious concerns in Tashkent, rather than understanding. This had a long-term impact on the bilateral relations. URL: <http://www.refdb.ru/look/1424584.html>; <http://www.refdb.ru/look/1424584.html> (in Russian).

¹²⁶ Iran expects to increase turnover with Uzbekistan at the expense of oil // RIA Novosti, 15.09.2015. URL: <http://www.ria.ru/economy/20150915/1252303300.html#ixzz4E4sW1w7M> (in Russian).

test that made it clear whether collaboration was possible at all. The recent trend towards the increase in the influence of conservative and radical communities of the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Dushanbe's convergence with Riyadh and Doha have turned into a common problem for Iran and Russia.¹²⁷

In addition to Tajikistan, Iran has quite specific relations with Turkmenistan, mostly due to the fact that the two countries are neighbours. The pragmatically neutral status of Turkmenistan from the point of view of Iran has remained, until recently, a deterrent enabling Ashgabat to distance itself from any international blocs. Among other things, this line of the Iran–Tajikistan relationship is underpinned by current economic relations, which are objectively beneficial for both countries. Nevertheless, these economic relations are rather specific and there is little chance they will expand. The oil and gas sector is the priority area for the engagement between the two countries; however, Iran imports Turkmen gas only to meet domestic requirements in its north–eastern provinces via the Korpjeje–Kordkuy and Dauletabad–Sarakhs–Khangiran pipelines. Iran is Turkmenistan's third–largest trade partner after China and Russia, but mostly due to natural gas deliveries.

Overall, none of the five post–Soviet countries in the region are likely to have extremely positive or extremely negative attitudes towards any breakthroughs in the relationship between Russia and Iran. The foreign policies of these countries is mostly contextual. Elements of strategic policy do exist, but only in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This implies that when referring to their multi–dimensional policies, they are increasingly interested in the existence of segmented external actors – tactical manoeuvres between their interests will help them find the most adequate wording for their own interests. However, room for such manoeuvres would be significantly limited if such entities as Iran and Russia pursued a concerted policy.

The region is lacking joint Russia–Iran economic, communication and energy projects. Objectively, there is no relevant need for such projects in the medium term. Iran's economic presence in the countries of the region following the lifting of the sanctions has not showed any significant dynamics. Therefore, if some competitive situations emerge, they are normally limited to certain areas and industries (as, for instance, the competition between Russia and Kazakhstan in the Iranian grain market) or are associated with Iran's involvement (or plans to be involved) in communication projects that run counter to Russia's interests and, in most cases, can be found within global Chinese projects (such as all of the East–West transport projects, as well as energy transport projects, including the construction of the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran oil pipeline).

Nevertheless, the new pattern for global relations, as well as ongoing transformations in the system of international relations, including Russia's so–called turn to the East – which, incidentally, has been very well received by the political administration of Iran – ensure the best environment for the establishment of a Rus–

¹²⁷ Knyazev A. Central Asia Enters a Zone of Turbulence.
URL: http://www.ng.ru/courier/2016-01-18/11_asia.html (in Russian).

sia–Iran strategic and regional partnership, making this possibility an increasingly relevant issue for both countries. In the foreseeable future, the framework of this regional partnership is expected to be filled mostly with security issues, the more so because effective cooperation of this kind has been underway for some time in the Middle East.

Strategic convergence between Russia and Iran could also serve as a reasonable counterbalance to the growing Chinese influence in Central Asia. In this context, it would be wise to analyse China’s attitude to hypothetical regional strategizing that could take place between Iran and Russia. Unless the ultimate goals of the establishment of this axis are approved by Beijing, China would be justifiably concerned about it. It is also apparent that without due account of Chinese projects the regional strategic partnership between Russia and Iran will be limited for both political and economic reasons. However, the strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran within the framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt project can enjoy China’s support and approbation, which will enable both Russia and Iran to be engaged in a series of promising beneficial cross–border projects as full participants. Partnership opportunities will be seriously limited along the entire border between the two countries and its effectiveness will be markedly lower if Russia and Iran opt for an exclusively bilateral framework. Joint foreign political efforts of the Moscow–Tehran axis can lead to the establishment of a new, more stable balance of powers that would be free from antagonism, in Central Asia and Middle East, and a new sustainable system of “checks and balances” regarding China’s regional strategies.

The views of Russia and Iran on the fundamental principles of stability and development coincide with the principles that underlay the system of international law after World War II. The new landscape of global relations and the changes in the system of international relations create a rather favourable framework for the establishment of such an “axis”, while making this opportunity an increasingly relevant item on the agendas of both countries.

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Central Asia’s unique geopolitical features have grabbed the attention of peripheral foreign powers during its history. The significance of the region, in particular, is seen in the relationship between neighboring Iran and Russia. In the decades since the nineteenth century, Central Asia had turned to the Tsar/Soviet Russian territories due to Moscow’s absolute dominance in the region. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and consequent geopolitical opening of the region, the presence of regional and global powers in Central Asia, once again, has once again increased. In the meantime, the footsteps of powers in the region precisely coincided with politically independent Central Asian states’ security, economic and sociocultural bonds with Russia, on the one hand, and the dubbing of the Soviet satellites as ‘Near Abroad’, on the other hand, gave huge emphasis to the region for the sake of Russia’s national interests and objectives.

Similarly, Central Asia as a neighboring region to Iran, has had enjoyed cultural, identity and (in some period of time) political and economic ties. The shared history of old linkage has set off new growing relationships between Iran and the newly independent states. Widespread economic interests of Central Asia and the significance of political/security developments of the region in neighboring countries were among the issues underscore the expansion of relationship between Iran and Central Asian states more than ever.

This analytical paper, focusing on Iran’s policy in Central Asia, will try to elucidate the basic features of Iranian approach to the region, study the possibilities of Iran–Russia regional cooperation and finally, recognize the opportunities for and constraints on further bilateral collaboration in Central Asia.

Iran’s Interests and Priorities in Central Asia

Two concepts of ‘economy’ and ‘security’ are at the core of any classification of Iran’s interests and objectives in Central Asia. In this regard, Iran’s interests in each of the two realms are narrowed down to some particular topics.

Economic Interests and Priorities

Trade, energy transmission and transportation are the three most important and major areas of Iran’s interests in Central Asia which its objectives are defined accordingly.

Iran’s policy on expanding trade with Central Asia is developed to achieve three main objectives: access to raw materials for manufacturing industries, market expansion for Iranian (consumer) goods, and transit network development to both secure Iranian exports to other regions and put Iran at the heart of the network¹²⁸. While the local bazaars have been limited and challenging, developing marketplaces and free trade areas in northern border towns have paved the way for inextricable economic links between Iran and Central Asian states. Moreover, Iran’s setting up of the Cooperation Council of Caspian Sea States (CCCSS) and inclusion of former Soviet states in the Economic Cooperation

¹²⁸ Daman Pak Jami. Economic Diplomacy of Islamic Republic of Iran in Central Asia. Tehran: center for international research and education. 2009. P. 175 (Farsi).

Organization (ECO) are deemed Iranian efforts for an all-out development of regional cooperation¹²⁹.

From the very first day after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been said that Iran could provide the Central Asian states' energy resources with the shortest transit route. Putting this idea into practice, Iran would grab the attention of the Central Asian energy suppliers and the European consumers. However, the most important driving force behind the lucrative project is the Central Asian inclination towards the diversification of energy transit routes and the European desire to diversify its energy resources¹³⁰.

Among Central Asian states, Iran's most important gas link has been forged with Turkmenistan. The National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) signed the Korpezhe–Kurt Kui gas pipeline contract with Turkman officials in October 1995 and the project came into operation in 1997 with transit capacity of 4bn cubic meters that after a while increased to 8bn cubic meters annually¹³¹. Iran–Turkmenistan gas ties were not limited to merely one pipeline. Turkmenistan opened a second gas pipeline to Iran on January 6, 2010¹³². With the inauguration of the second phase of the project on November 28, the new pipeline more than doubled Turkmenistan's annual gas exports to Iran to 18bn cubic meters¹³³.

On Iran–Central Asia oil cooperation, there have been two key projects so far, namely the swap deal and the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran oil pipeline (KTI). The former became operational while the latter remains on hold. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have both initiated low-volume oil swap deals with Iran, delivering oil in tankers to refineries in Iran's northern regions in exchange for similar volumes of crude at Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf¹³⁴. For the KTI pipeline, while the preliminary stages were ready at the turn of the century, some reasons are behind postponement of the project's completion.

Regarding the third area of interests (i.e. transportation), Iran's geographic position – neighbor to Central Asia and Caucasus, Indian Subcontinent, Persian Gulf and Small Asia (Anatolia), lying between Asia and Europe and access to international waters – gives the nation superior status in terms of regional connections. As the Soviet Union collapsed and Central Asian states became independent, Iran, once again, achieved its role as a bridge connecting West–East¹³⁵. However, given western restrictions on Iran, Central Asia has been deprived of Iran's strategic routes.

¹²⁹ Koulaee E. *Politics and Government in Central Asia*. Tehran: SAMT, 2008. P. 194.

¹³⁰ Putz C. *Why Is Central Asia Excited About the Iran Deal?* // *The Diplomat*, April 15, 2015.
URL: <http://www.thediplomat.com/2015/04/why-is-central-asia-excited-about-the-iran-deal>

¹³¹ Bouvalverdi M. *Iran-Turkmenistan ties: An Overview* // *Central Asia and the Caucasus Studies Quarterly*. 2004. No. 56. P. 98 (Farsi).

¹³² *Turkmenistan Opens New Iran Gas Pipeline* // BBC (6/1/2010). Retrieved from January 10, 2010.
URL: <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8443787.stm>

¹³³ *Turkmenistan Opens New Gas Pipeline into Iran* // IRAS, November 28, 2010. Retrieved from November 30, 2010.
URL: <http://www.iraneurasia.ir/fa/pages/?cid=12895> (Farsi).

¹³⁴ Bayulgen O. *Caspian Energy Wealth; Social Impacts and Implications for Regional Stability* // Wooden A.E., Stefes C.H. *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009. P. 168.

¹³⁵ Daman Pak Jami. *Economic Diplomacy of Islamic Republic of Iran in Central Asia*. Tehran: center for international research and education. 2009. P. 332 (Farsi).

The only ones open to Central Asia have been to the west through Russia, and to the east to China¹³⁶.

Precisely speaking, cotton from Uzbekistan and gas from Turkmenistan are two major trade goods that could be exported via Iranian routes. In this regard, Iran is developing its rail road infrastructure to boost regional trade and net more in transit taxes. By the end of 2014, for instance, the 900-kilometer Uzen–Gorgan railway was run, connecting Iran to Kazakhstan through Turkmenistan¹³⁷. Furthermore, during his visit to Ashgabat, capital city of Turkmenistan, in March 2015, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani announced that Tehran and Ashgabat are determined to accelerate the construction and launch of the ‘South–North corridor’, connecting The Gulf of Oman to Caspian Sea and Central Asia¹³⁸.

Security Interests and Priorities

Four issues and challenges are among Iran’s top security-typed objectives and priorities in Central Asia.

First, Iran has been concerned about soft security threats in Central Asian states resulting from the volatile situation in Afghanistan. From the Iranian perspective, the ongoing instability in Afghanistan might spill over into Central Asia through Tajikistan. Moreover, Iran has hosted hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees in recent decades. These refugees not only have been a heavy burden on Iran’s economy, but also are seen to be a threat to law and order¹³⁹.

Second, religious extremism in Central Asia, stemming from Taliban’s strict interpretation of Islam, is another Iranian security concern as is the possibility of its rapid spread in the region. Recently, the rise of Daesh in the Middle East and its slight inclination towards terrorist activities in Central Asia creates serious national security worries.

Third, militarization of the Caspian Sea is among top serious security challenge Iran has been facing for decades. Generally speaking, there has been a common belief in the region that deploying military forces in the sea might spur a regional arms contest. The Russian Caspian Flotilla, as the oldest Russian fleet in the Caspian Sea, has been active since 1771 and remains the strongest navy in the region. Inherited from the Soviet Navy, Republic of Azerbaijan has a militarily high status, and gradually has been renewing its fleet in the Caspian Sea. Kazakh Naval fleets in Caspian Sea were also renewed with the help of western governments and Russia. Even, Turkmenistan, which adopted status of permanent neutrality in the United Nations, has taken steps to wield its military power in the Caspian

¹³⁶ Pannier B. Does Nuclear Deal Presage a New Era for Iran-Central Asia Relations? // RFE-RL. 2015. Retrieved from June 4, 2016. URL: <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-iran-central-asia/26941315.html>

¹³⁷ Merat Arron R. Rouhani’s Central Asia Policies in Spotlight at SCO Summit // Al Monitor. 2014. Retrieved from June 1, 2015. URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2013/09/rouhani-central-asia-policy-at-sco-summit.html>

¹³⁸ Vatanka A. Does Iran Have a Bridge to Central Asia? // Al-Monitor. 2015. Retrieved from March 18, 2015. URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-turkmenistan-rouhani-kazakhstan.html>

¹³⁹ Herzog E. Iran and Central Asia // R. Allison and L. Jonson (Eds.). Central Asian Security: The New International Context. Washington and London: Brookings and Chatham House, 2001.

Sea¹⁴⁰ (Saber, 2005: 89–90). As a result concerns about military contests in the Caspian Sea region, which could end up in a military conflict between the states on any disputing issues, has increased. Iran's regional priority is to foil any plots which might be directly threatening its national and security interests.

Fourth, Iran perceives the boots of its enemy on the ground in Central Asia as a direct threat to its national security. Iran, indeed, has been a fierce critic of the Central Asian states' growing security relationship with the U.S. and Israel and has also cautiously lamented the presence of NATO and the OSCE in the region. Iranian officials have always expressed their concerns over NATO/OSCE long-term interventions in the Central Asian affairs and have been concerned about these institutions gradually expanding their areas of activities in the region¹⁴¹. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and, accordingly, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, to add insult to injury, intensified Iran's concerns about a foreign military presence in its immediate neighborhood. Iran has always considered the U.S. post-9/11 intervention in the region as a major source of threat to its national interests and security.

Iran–Russia Cooperation in Central Asia: Opportunities and Constraints

It appears that Tehran and Moscow are advancing their distinct economic agendas in Central Asia which consequently decrease the chance of joint cooperation. From a general point of view, Russia's efforts to maintain economic ties with Central Asian states and to secure a monopoly over different sectors of the economy are designed to limit the real and effective cooperation with other actors, including Iran. In fact, Russia is considering the expansion of trade ties between the Central Asian states and third parties as potentially threatening action, due to the fact that not only could it damage Russia's standing among the Central Asian states' trading partners, but also, given the trade partners' diversification, boost the political and economic bargaining position of the former Soviet states (i.e. Central Asian countries) against Russia. This trend applies roughly to the economic relationship between Central Asian states and Russia, as the latter in particular, lost its rank to China in the region. Although Iran's economic maneuvering in the region are not akin to that of China, it has its value and importance in terms of long-term outcomes for the region.

In regard to the energy sector, while the energy trading volumes between Iran and Central Asia has been low, the Russian monopolies on energy exports, in particular gas exports, in the region, do not let post-JCPOA Iran, with attractive and market for European firms, expand its energy market to the Central Asian states. Similarly, the growing ties of Iran–Central Asia in the transportation sector, providing the region with alternative routes to Europe and global markets, are not in the Russian national and regional interest. Moscow, for instance, is seeking

¹⁴⁰ Saber M. Iran's Approach at Caspian Sea: Confidence-Building, Security and Stability // *Central Asia and the Caucasus Studies Quarterly*, 2005. No. 60. P. 89-90. (Farsi).

¹⁴¹ Herzig E. Iran and Central Asia // R. Allison, L. Jonson (Eds.). *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*. Washington and London: Brookings and Chatham House, 2001.

to secure the main route of the Chinese ‘One Belt, One Road’ megaproject and have it pass through Russian soil.

Nevertheless, given growing Iran–Russia economic ties and Russian initiatives for regional trade cooperation, in particular the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the only viable option Iran and Russia could jointly take in Central Asia is a multilateral relationship. Russia needs to assure itself of Iran’s low–profile economic activities in the region. This is why Moscow overwhelmingly prefers a sort of multilateralism under its leadership with a limited role for Iran in this mechanism. However, it is unclear whether Iran will accept this role with respect to its increased alternatives post–JCPOA or Russia stands firm in its governance of the multilateral mechanism in the region.

Unlike economic issues, Central Asian security paves the way for some sort of cooperation (i.e. bilateral or multilateral). Iran and Russia, both, have been concerned about soft security threats, from drug trafficking to extremism to the possible spread of terrorism in the region. As both states fully share the same view on establishing peace and stability in Central Asia, they strongly agree that the idea of foreign boots on the ground, in particular the U.S. army, is to the detriment of regional security. Thus, it seems security cooperation between Iran and Russia, on the basis of common interests, is based on two simultaneous approaches: bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In this regard, while the preexisting Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) might fit well into the security structure of Central Asia, a variety of factors including Russian–Chinese disagreement on SCO’s function and Beijing’s reluctance to overestimate the security dimension of the Organization, put obstacles in the way of SCO becoming a security mechanism in the region. If Russia and China succeed in attracting the support of regional states, the mere achievement of all parties in a common perception of necessity for cooperation against security threats could prepare the grounds for Iran–Russia security cooperation in Central Asia.

Conclusion

Historically speaking, Iran and Russia, as neighboring nations which have had close bonds of friendship and cooperation with Central Asian states, have drawn up strategies for joint work in the region. While the two concepts of ‘economy’ and ‘security’ have been at the core of the strategies, each of them has been involved in different elements which could shape fundamentally the nature of the Iran–Russia relationship in Central Asia. Their economic priorities and strategies in the region have been more competitive rather than cooperative; however, strong security ties between the two states in Central Asia have been providing a basis for actively regional cooperation. In sum, Iran and Russia need strategic planning and more importantly, to increase their efforts to encourage regional states to pursue the Iranian–Russian agenda.

Section IV. Possibilities and Prospects for Economic Cooperation

Topic 9. Development of Regional and Trans-Regional Transportation Routes: Perspectives for Partnership

Russia and Iran's Vision of the Prospects of Regional and Transregional Communications in Central Eurasia

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When we consider specific projects, Russia's vision of the prospects of transportation integration differs from that of Iran,¹⁴² although there are points of contact. In the Caspian region, Russia's actions have long been lagging behind many implemented intergovernmental initiatives and have never been fully adequate to the transformation of the Caspian region from a periphery to a crossroads of transportation corridors. China's continuing economic rise and its export-oriented economy result in many Eurasian states, including Russia and Iran, becoming interested in offering China transit corridors for its cargo and goods shipped to the West. For that purpose, these states suggest long-maturing intraregional transportation initiatives and projects, such as the Northern Sea Route, the Baikal-Amur Mainline, the Iran-Pakistan railroad.

Russia traditionally considers China's initiatives as primarily transit projects. Given Russia's deteriorating relations with the West, it now accords priority to such projects. China, in its turn, tries to push through its strictly practical interests disguised as overland transit initiatives. The volume of Chinese container transit shipments via Russia reached 320,000 TEU annually¹⁴³ and remains at that level. Transit via Kazakhstan has grown over the last three years from 6,000 to 48,000 TEU and is predicted to reach 95,000 TEU in 2016.¹⁴⁴

Thus, for fifteen years, China has been focused on constructing overland logistical chains that bypass Russia,¹⁴⁵ despite the advantages the use of Russia's transportation system offers in several key areas. Thus, when transporting transit cargo through Russia, the distance shortens two or four times depending on the route,¹⁴⁶ and delivery time drops to 12 days (as opposed to the average of 38 days when shipping by sea). This external factor increases the role of the Caspian states and Pakistan.¹⁴⁷ It is that group of states in Central Eurasia

¹⁴² Developing Railway Transit by Cooperation of Railway and Ports // International Oil, Rail & Port Conference. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/TR0H2Y>

¹⁴³ Transit railway shipments of high-capacity containers from China via Russia increase // JSC RZD's official website. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/g7DEZS> (in Russian)

¹⁴⁴ Chinese container transit to Europe via Kazakhstan will double in 2016 // The Transportation Strategy Center. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/lhg2g> (in Russian)

¹⁴⁵ Georgia Welcomes First Silk Road Cargo Train from China. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/hL4SC2>

¹⁴⁶ Silk Road 2.0: Why Russia needs new railroads. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/sSkUBI> (in Russian)

¹⁴⁷ CDWP Approves Uplift Projects Worth Rs244bn. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/SLte8Y>

that is today's pivot for most regional and transregional transportation projects linked to cargo flows from China.

The utilization of the Russian transportation system today largely depends on whether Russia will succeed in becoming integrated in the emerging Caspian transportation routes. Yet Russia is very slow to develop ties in the region. It is greatly impeded by the EU-supported TRACECA project that is now being actively developed even despite greater shipping distances, higher costs of cargo shipping, the need for four container transshipments, and other disadvantages. In 2015, railway lines from Turkey to Georgia and the Marmaray tunnel under the Bosphorus Strait (in Istanbul) became operational. It allowed to send the first freight train bypassing Russia.¹⁴⁸ Under such circumstances, the emerging latitudinal transportation and logistical flow¹⁴⁹ via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Iran revitalized the Caspian Sea navigation. Objectively, Russia has an opportunity to draw some of that cargo flow into its transportation system, yet Russia's Olya port is yet hardly able to compete with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's projects. The latter is developing, although not entirely smoothly,¹⁵⁰ a large port cluster in Aktau and plans to increase cargo transshipments via its ports to 25 million tons by 2020.¹⁵¹ New container vessels for the purpose have already been commissioned in Russia.¹⁵²

Thus, Russia's participation in the largest regional transportation projects (TRACECA, China–Kazakhstan and China–Pakistan projects) is either minimal or entirely absent. These projects were initially aimed at minimizing the use of Russia's transportation system, as it had happened to trans–Siberian routes.¹⁵³ Clearly, Russia is least interested in such a development.

Iran's leadership considers regional transportation projects through the lens of China's clear desire to lay transportation communications and ship cargo via routes to the south of the Caspian Sea,¹⁵⁴ that is, via Iran's geographical location. Tehran expended considerable efforts in order to become a transiter of China's cargo¹⁵⁵ and successfully achieved its goal. Over a very short period of time, it constructed two key railroads, to Turkmenistan and Pakistan¹⁵⁶ (although both require transshipments due to different gauge).¹⁵⁷ China received convenient

¹⁴⁸ The first train from China arrived in Tbilisi as part of the Silk Road Project // Georgia Online. URL: <http://www.apsny.ge/2015/eco/1450034694.php> (in Russian)

¹⁴⁹ Ukraine inaugurated a transportation route for shipping cargo to China bypassing Russia // Lenta.ru. URL: <https://www.lenta.ru/news/2016/01/15/newway/> (in Russian); دش نارعت دراو مش یریدا دار یتیزن ارت راطق ن یتس خن (The Silk Road's first transit train arrived in Tehran) // IRNA.fa. URL: <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81964170>

¹⁵⁰ Deputy Prime Minister Sagintaev compared Aktau seaport to hell. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/xFrRGO> (in Russian)

¹⁵¹ Nuryl-Zhol State Infrastructure Development program for 2015–2019 // Strategy 2050. URL: <https://www.goo.gl/f94q4o>

¹⁵² A unique bulk freighter was launched in Shlisselburg by a cardiologist and a multi // Federal News Agency. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/l96di1> (in Russian)

¹⁵³ Missing out // Top Secret. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/GG1kbP> (In Russian)

¹⁵⁴ Iran, China and the Silk Road Train // The Diplomat. URL: <http://www.thediplomat.com/2016/03/iran-china-and-the-silk-road-train>

¹⁵⁵ First Train from China to Iran Stimulates Silk Road Revival // Xinhua News. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/UtPI3n>

¹⁵⁶ Pakistan – Iran – Turkey Container Train // Grantham A. Various Articles, Mainly About Railways. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/qE3YBN>

¹⁵⁷ Iran uses the 1435 gauge, Azerbaijan and other CIS countries use the 1520 gauge, Pakistan uses the 1676 gauge. The only bordering countries with the same gauge are Turkey and Iraq. As of 2016, Iran had ties only to the Turkish network.

access to a Persian Gulf port (Bandar Abbas) and found an overland bypass of the Strait of Malacca. China thus ensured a safer navigation on its principal export channel where the danger had arose due to tensions provoked by China itself in the South China Sea.¹⁵⁸

Iran continues to implement several regional project at once, attempting to create a highly developed transportation hub.¹⁵⁹ A railroad that goes from Khorramshahr to the Iraqi border is already operational, and the railway-automotive transshipment terminal has already been built. To finally connect with Iraq's railway network, Tehran announced the construction of a bridge and offered Iraq a loan for the purpose.¹⁶⁰ Besides, it is promoting the possibility to transport cargo to Europe via Turkey without transshipments¹⁶¹ (currently, it is necessary to use the ferry to cross Lake Van).¹⁶² The Rasht-Astara stretch becoming operational allows Iran to complete the western branch of the North-South corridor and to link to TRACECA via Azerbaijan. That would allow to ship cargo from Iran to Turkey bypassing Lake Van. At the same time, TRACECA becomes capable of transporting cargo south of the Caspian Sea and of abandoning the use of Caspian ferries. In this regard, Akhalkalaki-Kars and Rasht-Astara railway projects could be used as parts of a single corridor, thus enhancing both Azerbaijan and Iran's transit potential (bypassing Russia).

Iran took certain steps in its cooperation with India which is searching for ways to overcome Pakistan's land blockade¹⁶³ and to gain access to the Central Asian markets.¹⁶⁴ This project initiated by New Delhi has been presented as a highly ambitious undertaking,¹⁶⁵ yet its implementation is progressing extremely slowly due to India's desire to coordinate its foreign policies with other countries, including the US.¹⁶⁶

The projects implemented within and around Iran once again show that Russia needs to join the Iranian hub.¹⁶⁷ The project of a longitudinal railroad to the west of the Caspian Sea (Russia considers it a part of the North-South corridor) fits within this design entirely and enhances Russia's presence at the Caspian crossroads.

What are Russia and Iran's common interests?

Russia and Iran no longer have a land border, but, due to similar geopolitical processes, they, just like India, have been forced, within the span of the last five

¹⁵⁸ Questions of geography: Will a war break out in the South China Sea? // RBC. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/XdG9i9> (in Russian)

¹⁵⁹ Iran's principal logistical routes // Russia's Ministry of Economic Development. Foreign Economic Information Portal. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/DoqgL3> (in Russian)

¹⁶⁰ Iranian President Urges to Speed Up Iraq-Iran Railway Project // Iraqi News. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/gbSxIw>

¹⁶¹ Erdogan Focuses on Trade During Iran Visit // Al-Monitor.com. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/msAAIY>

¹⁶² Iran and Turkey have the same European railway gauge, but communication is complicated due to the need to cross Lake Van in Turkey by ferry. The question of constructing an overland road bypassing the lake has long been discussed.

¹⁶³ For instance, Pakistan allows cargo transit from Afghanistan to India and blocks shipments from India to Afghanistan.

¹⁶⁴ Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement 2010 (APTTA) // Government of Pakistan. Ministry of Commerce. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/JaFGRH>

¹⁶⁵ Why the Chabahar Port Agreement Kills Two Birds With One Stone // Hindustan Times. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/oJWsa1>

¹⁶⁶ Pankratenko I. Iran-India relations // Iran.ru. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/tDRWeX> (in Russian)

¹⁶⁷ On August 7, the first train will travel from Mumbai to Moscow via the North-South transit corridor // Gudok.ru. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/IS2VGW> (in Russian)

years, to oppose (with varying degrees of success) attempts to isolate them internationally, including attempts to exclude them from the emerging global transit communications. In this regard, India's desire to ship cargo and goods via Iran's ports to the EU countries¹⁶⁸ suits the interests of both Russia and Iran. Besides, the revitalized North–South international transport corridor (ITC) with Russia's participation increases, even if only nominally, Iran's geopolitical weight, and with India remaining neutral,¹⁶⁹ enhances Iran's political influence in the Persian Gulf. China appears to be more focused on closer relations with Pakistan¹⁷⁰ as they have a common border and do not need third parties to interact.¹⁷¹

Given China's rapidly growing influence at the Caspian crossroads, the North–South ITC project allows Iran to maneuver between the interests of the greatest powers. It would be erroneous to state that Iran–China relations are limited to energy only.¹⁷² Yet Iran retains its freedom of maneuver and demonstrates the possibilities afforded by interaction with other countries¹⁷³ including Russia.¹⁷⁴ The North–South corridor project (its western branch) is intended to ensure stable two–way cargo flows¹⁷⁵ and export of technologies, machines, and equipment into Iran,¹⁷⁶ which fully suits Russia's interests.

The North—South ITC Project: Implementation Prospects

The North—South ITC is officially positioned as an initiative proposed by a group of countries, yet none of the countries considers the project in its entirety, but each focuses on individual parts.

Russia views the North—South ITC project¹⁷⁷ primarily as a way to set up a new route for importing goods from China and India via Iran. In the future, the ITC will also shape conditions for a transit cargo flow between the Baltics and the Persian Gulf, if this clearly advantageous project¹⁷⁸ gains political support. Without said support, such an initiative may be said to have no future. The North—South route essentially offer an alternative to the Suez Canal or a route that bypasses

¹⁶⁸ In 2014, India's exported about 36 million tons of cargo to the EU.

¹⁶⁹ Pankratenko I. Iran-India relations // Iran.ru. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/tDRWeX> (in Russian).

¹⁷⁰ Infrastructure Project: First Tranche of OLMT Loan Released // The Express Tribune. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/piDMiK>

¹⁷¹ The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Gets Even More Ambitious // The Diplomat. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/JFvHIM>

¹⁷² NORINCO to Build Metro in Iran // China Economic Review. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/wa0WzI>; 300 King Long BRT Buses Shipped to Iran // ChinaBuses.org. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/2aKbMc>; First LRVs Shipped to Mashhad // Railway Gazette. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/e6R2lJ>; Xi Jinping meets Ayatollah Khamenei: China and Iran strengthen the Eurasian Triad // GP Geopolitics analytical portal. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/YrkhNp> (in Russian).

¹⁷³ Iran, Italy Agree on Hi-Tech Train Project // Fars News Agency. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/vrzEMy>

¹⁷⁴ JCS RZD in the global transportation system // RZD. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/gXvsTr> (in Russian); Russia's Loan to Iran on the Agenda for Moscow's Negotiations // IRNA. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/djHkRf>

¹⁷⁵ Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan agreed to complete the railway circle around the Caspian Sea // Gudok.ru. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/djHkRf> (in Russian).

¹⁷⁶ اهمیت راه و بندر عراق جنبش یارب ناری ایصالصاوم یاهریسم تئمه (The importance of transportation routes for the Indian subcontinent in Eurasia) // News.mrud.ir. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/HCK3XF>

¹⁷⁷ North-South international transport corridor (details) // Russia's Ministry for Foreign Affairs. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/Rdn5OK> (in Russian).

¹⁷⁸ Vinokurov E. Yu., Dzhadralliev M.A., Shcherbanin Yu.A. The EAEU international transport corridors: faster, cheaper, and more. Moscow: Eurasian Development Bank, 2009. URL: <http://www.transtec.transtec-neva.ru/files/File/eurozec.pdf> (in Russian).

it at a significant distance. At the same time, it should be taken into account that the canal was expanded in 2015 (a second lane was added)¹⁷⁹ and it can now accommodate 97 vessels a day without container transshipments en route (for instance, due to different railway gauges). Besides, the Somali pirates are no longer a threat.¹⁸⁰ These circumstances will hardly prompt shippers to change their established habits in the foreseeable future.

As regards the overland infrastructure (railways) of the North—South ITC, Russia and Azerbaijan are most interested in the construction of its western branch, and it is moving at a snail pace¹⁸¹: the bridge crossing at the Iran–Azerbaijan border¹⁸² and the Rasht – Astara¹⁸³ railway about 175 kilometers long are yet to be built. At the Caspian states summit in Baku in August 2016, the bridge crossing was defined, and Azerbaijan gave out a loan to continue construction.¹⁸⁴

As regards the corridor's maritime version, Russia is completing the construction of Bronka, a large port cluster designed to receive not only imports, but potentially transit cargo: otherwise it will have significant excess capacities.¹⁸⁵ Yet increasing the transit volume requires a political decision by China. As regards the Caspian Sea, Russia has no developed ports there, and since there is a through-way railroad, such ports will hardly be in demand in the nearest future.

Different railway gauges require transshipments,¹⁸⁶ which leads to delays of up to two days, with a total of up to four days on a through-way from China to Europe.

On the part of India, the corridor, or at least its southern part outside Russia, enjoys the steady support of the business community (largely because there is no other alternative) and it has a very specific purpose: to give Indian companies and goods access to the markets in the neighboring Central Asian states and Afghanistan.¹⁸⁷ As always, there is a complicated political underpinning here: the project should start at Chabahar seaport which is built with India's investments.¹⁸⁸ New Delhi needs the port to gain access to Afghanistan's mineral resources,¹⁸⁹ and

¹⁷⁹ Egypt Shows Off \$8 Billion Suez Canal Expansion that the World May Not Need // Bloomberg.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/OhKNy1>

¹⁸⁰ There are no more Somali pirates. How did that happen? // Crime in Ukraine. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/ocw9CC>

¹⁸¹ Iran-Azeri Ministers Hope for Completion of «Friendship Railway» // IRNA.en. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/B71j52>

¹⁸² Iran and Azerbaijan Launch Construction of a Cross-Border Railway Bridge // Railway Gazette.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/OUxxuV>;
 North-South. Azerbaijan and Iran lay the foundations of a railway bridge // Azerbaijan News.
 URL: <http://www.novosti.az/transport/1092.html> (in Russian).

¹⁸³ Azerbaijan Allocates \$500m for Railway Project // Iran Daily. URL: <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/140138.html>

¹⁸⁴ Azerbaijan will give Iran a loan for railway construction // Moscow-Baku.ru. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/ph5INw> (in Russian).

¹⁸⁵ Bronka port plans to receive the first vessel in September // Vedomosti. URL: <https://www.goo.gl/NkUYB1> (in Russian).

¹⁸⁶ The rules of calculating cargo railway delivery dates // JSC RZD's official website.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/0Sr1iC> (in Russian)

¹⁸⁷ Regional Connectivity – Iran as India's Gateway to Western & Central Asia // Arsha Consulting.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/NHK22n>

¹⁸⁸ Rouhani: Chabahar port will become a symbol of strategic relations between Iran and India // TASS.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/dRG41F> (in Russian)

¹⁸⁹ Chabahar Port: Window of Opportunity for India // Iicidi. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/K6a0rm>

India has already announced the construction of a railway leading from Chabahar to Afghanistan via Zahedan.¹⁹⁰ At the same time, India is forced to maintain power balance in the Persian Gulf,¹⁹¹ where China is constructing Gwadar port (leased from Pakistan for 43 years¹⁹²). India is largely motivated by its increasing concerns about China building a naval base there.¹⁹³

Several things are of crucial importance for Iran. Firstly, it needs its first deep-water port, since Bandar Abbas has restrictions on the draft of the docking vessels, and it also needs to “move closer” to the Indian Ocean transit channel. It will open up great opportunities for trading with other maritime powers.¹⁹⁴ Secondly, Tehran is interested in decreasing the chances of a maritime blockade by constructing a port to the east of the Strait of Hormuz which accommodates 20% of the world’s entire oil traffic and where military contingents of unfriendly states are always on the move. Thirdly, the project allows to speed up the socioeconomic development of the depressive Sistan and Baluchestan province.

Thus, the North–South ITC will undoubtedly be developed, but mostly as a mosaics of intraregional initiatives outside Russia and with its limited participation (largely due to the unfavorable geopolitical situation).

The Caspian Transportation and Logistics System: Possibilities and Limitations in Developing Regional Trade

Considering limitations in developing interregional trade, we should pay particular attention to organizational, geopolitical, and technical aspects.

Organizational aspects include non-tariff barriers, although they may be dealt with through “cameral” efforts, that is, by concluding additional international agreements on simplifying customs procedures for trans-border shipments and by coordinating in advance well-thought-through logistical delivery plans (that is, no new expensive construction projects are required).¹⁹⁵

Geopolitical limitations are reduced to a conscious refusal to participate in creating or using transportation communications even if they offer competitive advantages. For instance, due to geopolitical risks, China does not give preference to individual transportation routes, but strives to use to the hilt the maritime route that is largely independent of transiter countries, and to diversify its overland

¹⁹⁰ Chabahar-Fahraj Railway Project // سازمان همکاری‌های اقتصادی و فنی (Organization for Investment, Economic and Technical Assistance of Iran). URL: <http://www.goo.gl/yDHN3F>

¹⁹¹ Why the Chabahar Port Agreement Kills Two Birds With One Stone // Hindustan Times. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/oJWsa1>

¹⁹² Economic Zone: Government Hands Gwadar Land Over to China // Business Recorder. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/WICNkj>

¹⁹³ Gwadar Port Integral to China Maritime Expansion // The Tribune. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/ZAi26g>

¹⁹⁴ «دش و غل» ناریا شرکتگن یم تشکرش هیلع ابورا هیداحتا یمیرحت (South Korea prepares to launch container shipments to Iran) // IRNA.f.a. URL: <http://goo.gl/9ak1Cx>; Iran, Japan Ink MoU on Transport Cooperation // Fars News Agency. URL: <http://goo.gl/eW6MCR>; (The EU’s sanctions imposed on Iran’s national oil tanker company have been lifted) // Radio Farda. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/cwWR42>

¹⁹⁵ On the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan on April 7 in Baku // AfterShock information center. URL: <https://www.goo.gl/EgnJYJ> (in Russian).

ties. This is why China finances the construction of new railways even though the Trans-Siberian railway has been in operation for a long time.

Technical aspects are also often difficult to deal with. Even though shipping cargo between railways with different gauges is fairly easy, difficulties emerge when new railways are constructed. For instance, Afghanistan delays implementing its railway projects as it borders on countries with three different gauges and cannot choose one (1435, 1520, or 1676). It is also important to note insurmountable tough spots such as ferries, steep slopes, and off-size tunnels.

The possibilities include optimizing the region's logistic shipping chains when the states make a whole series of international transportation lines operational. When the construction of the railway from Chabahar port to Zahedan completes, it will offer a shorter route for transporting cargo between China and the Persian Gulf, from that port via Azerbaijan toward Russia and into Europe via TRACECA. The transportation time will be halved, even with transshipments. In essence, the entire transit system is now being held up by the construction of the Rasht – Astará railway. In the future, efforts should be channeled into enhancing the existing railways: building second tracks, eliminating railway crossings, reinforcing tracks for extra heavy trains, constructing transshipment terminals at gauge junctions (Astará). Starting Iran–Russia railway communication requires reinforcing, restoring, and leveling off certain mainlines: the Aldy – Sunzha, Kizlyar – Sulak stretches, and the Baku junction bypass (Karadag – Sumqayit – Chag).

The SREB Project and Iran's Prospects

China's transportation and infrastructure development boom that goes on for the second five-year-plan results not only in world records,¹⁹⁶ but also in involving large-scale human resources in transportation construction. Consequently, China offers transportation initiatives to foreign markets, be it the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project or something similar. Beijing aims primarily to export transportation and construction services and to gain access to fuel and energy resources. In this regard, Iran–China cooperation is quite successful.¹⁹⁷ The subway construction assistance program is being implemented in Iran's cities (China also plans to open subway in 3–5 Chinese cities annually). Export gas pipeline¹⁹⁸ (in addition to Turkmenistan's one) is also being constructed.

Thus, Iran is rather closely integrated into the SREB, but it sees the initiative differently from Russia. Iran intends to implement several large local transportation projects jointly with China and other neighboring states, for instance, the project of constructing a high-speed Tehran – Mashhad railway.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ For instance, 5 new subway lines (111 kilometers long with 51 stations) were opened in Beijing in a single day.

¹⁹⁷ Pastukhova G. China-Iran cooperation: common tactical and strategic interests // PIR Center.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/wOB18A> (in Russian)

¹⁹⁸ Iran, Pakistan Inaugurate Gas Pipeline Project // Xinhua News. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/dLStAi>

¹⁹⁹ China to Help Iran Build High-Speed Rail as Part of "One Belt, One Road" Strategy // South China Morning Post.
 URL: <http://www.goo.gl/tpGxpZ>

Recommendations on Intensifying Cooperation in Transportation

Russia, the Caspian states (including Iran), and India are actively constructing transportation communications in various forms, including joint projects. Cooperation may be intensified in construction, but also in passenger and cargo transportation, and in supplying rolling stock. For instance, Iran has started a large-scale subway construction program in 9 cities. It involves building 292 kilometers of tracks, of them 159.2 kilometers are already under construction.²⁰⁰ India is building 578.2 kilometers²⁰¹ of new subway tracks in 6 cities, designs are underway for 13 more cities, and designing is announced to start on subways for 4 more cities. Baku continues to construct third subway line. Besides the subway, both Iran²⁰² and India²⁰³ announced the projects of expanding the BRT networks, which will require importing a large number of buses. India has long been engaged in unifying its railway network (reconstructing the narrow-gauge roads) and it increases India's demand for new rolling stock.²⁰⁴

Russia clearly has every possibility to supply the rolling stock²⁰⁵ for the subway projects (it has previously supplied rolling stock to Baku and Tehran²⁰⁶) and to participate in designing and constructing subway networks intended to solve transportation problems in the largest cities of the densely populated region.²⁰⁷

Iran's program of railway electrification (both suburban and inter-city lines) and of constructing new railways opens up opportunities for increasing the export of Russian electric locomotives, cargo cars, and locomotives.²⁰⁸ Selling Russian passenger planes to Iran could become another specific project. Iran is estimated to need about 200–250 craft.²⁰⁹ Since new projects in the oil and gas industry have been announced, Russia could export its pipe-layers (which had been sold to Iran before the sanctions²¹⁰), heavy trucks, combine harvesters, etc.²¹¹ Another promising area of cooperation is equipping Iran's vehicles with satellite navigators as part of Russia–Iran GLONASS cooperation.²¹²

²⁰⁰ Urban Rail Transit in Asia // Urban Rail. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/WIRb1c> (retrieved on July 2, 2016).

²⁰¹ Metro to Cover Whole of Delhi by 2021, No Fare Hike: Sreedharan // The Economic Times. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/OCfoWZ>

²⁰² BRT in Iran: Beneficiary of Country's Transportation Reforms // Global Mass Transit Report. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/BCK6Vn>

²⁰³ India is developing plans for 14 cities, and in 6 cities, BRT (Bus Rapid Transit using bus lanes) is being constructed.

²⁰⁴ RZD's prospects in India // WINAMORE BTS. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/S0AATx> (in Russian).

²⁰⁵ Contract signed to supply subway cars to the Baku subway // Made in Russia. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/D3qz7> (in Russian).

²⁰⁶ In 1995, Russia sold 8 cars for the Tehran subway.

²⁰⁷ Calcutta (India) subway was built and opened in 1984 with the USSR's technical assistance.

²⁰⁸ Ural Locomotives will sell 40 electric locomotives to Iran // Gudok.ru. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/m8lfx> (in Russian)

²⁰⁹ Iran Seeks More Aircraft as Questions Linger Over Earlier Deals // Tehran Times. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/HjHZQz>

²¹⁰ Details on trade and economic cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran // INOTEX 5th International innovation and technology exhibition. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/QH2epp> (in Russian).

²¹¹ In 2016, KAMAZ plans to sell first hundred trucks to Iran // Autostat analytical agency. URL: <https://www.autostat.ru/news/26010> (in Russian); Iran will purchase Rostselmash's combine harvesters // Vestifinance.ru. URL: <http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/68950> (in Russian); KAMAZ, GAZ, and AvtoVAZ plan a move into Iran // Life. URL: <https://www.goo.gl/bhdTKU> (in Russian).

²¹² GLONASS stations will appear in Iran // Lenta.ru. URL: <https://www.lenta.ru/news/2014/05/13/glonass> (in Russian).

As regards the infrastructure for further developing the Caspian Sea maritime route, several of Russia's internal problems must be resolved. Thus, Makhachkala port experiences more and more malfunctions,²¹³ which is not at all conducive to increasing the transit cargo volumes, including oil cargoes which account for a large part of shipments in the region. This problem must be resolved immediately. Russia's Olya port is developing too slowly and has from the outset lacked a competitive edge transit-wise, compared to other Caspian ports²¹⁴: it requires piloting and ice channeling, has restrictions on the draft of the docking vessels,²¹⁵ and needs to have its approach channel constantly deepened.

Given the circumstances, the most promising long-term perspective seems to be focusing on developing the railway network.²¹⁶ It will require the construction of a bridge crossing on the Iran-Azerbaijan border and the car truck change station, as well as a terminal for cargo and container transshipment.

Another crucial project is reviving the Chabahar – Zahedan railway construction started back in 2010.²¹⁷

²¹³ The criminal transit. Ramazan Abdulatipov is fighting to keep Gadzhiev, Makhachkala port director who scared away Russia's oil producers, in his office // Comromat.Ru. URL: http://www.compromat.ru/page_37027.htm (in Russian); Surrendering Makhachkala port will result Russia's collapse // Center for the Study of Regional Problems. URL: <http://www.rf-region.ru/articles/2838.htm> (in Russian).

²¹⁴ Mazur E. Transshipment impotence // NEO Center. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/1SgRMB> (in Russian).

²¹⁵ Approaching the Caspian Sea // Novaya perevoznaya. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/effMQf2> (in Russian).

²¹⁶ Russian and Azerbaijan railways have agreed on a through tariff for the North-South international transport corridor // JSC RZD's official website. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/5Zx3Fs> (in Russian).

²¹⁷ Railway Construction Launched With a Bang // Railway Gazette. URL: <http://www.goo.gl/5Glx09>

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As a stable country in the turbulent Middle East region, the Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys a remarkable position to play a better role in this region. Iran’s land routes (including road and rail), air and marine routes are endowed with good infrastructure and are perhaps without parallel in the region. Completion of the development plans for Chabahar free port and Iran’s eastern rail network will turn the Islamic Republic into a powerful country. On the other hand, connecting Iran’s national railroad to the port city of Astara after completion of the Qazvin–Rasht–Anzali–Astara railroad network will connect Iran’s railroad network to all Russia’s railroad (through the Republic of Azerbaijan) and will be a great step toward development of the International North–South Transport Corridor (NOSTRAC). Unused or underused capacities of Iran’s sea ports and commercial ships have made the country ready to take advantage of emerging opportunities. In this context the Sixth Five–Year Economic, Cultural and Political Development Plan of Iran, which will be implemented from 2017, will be able to obtain its far–reaching goals. In the meantime, and on a regional scale, Iran’s land and air corridors are important for the promotion of regional communications.

This article reviews available transportation infrastructure for the expansion of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Eurasian countries and also discusses available grounds for the development of the International North–South Transport Corridor.

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s Logistic Capacities

During recent years, the insecurity of air corridors over Iraq, Syria and Ukraine has resulted in increased air traffic through Iran’s air space. According to a report by news agencies, Iran has ranked first in the world in terms of air traffic growth. Due to its position along the East–West transit route, Iran enjoys a unique position full of potential. This position can be best taken advantage of through completion of plans and projects, which would be competitive in comparison with transport routes crossing other countries. Iran is located at the heart of the East–West superhighway between two high–traffic regions of Asia–Pacific and Europe, and the country’s security, in view of the insecure conditions in neighboring countries and the entire region, is one of the prominent characteristics of Iran.

The presence of such terrorist groups as Daesh (ISIS) in the region and the insecurity and other consequences that result from it have encouraged use of Iranian territory to connect Europe to the Persian Gulf region. From an outside viewpoint, Iran is the sole island of stability and security in the turbulent and crisis–wrecked Middle East region.

From the viewpoint of international standards, road infrastructure, police presence, security, traffic signs, and availability of fueling stations and accommodations, the network of the Iranian roads is of acceptable quality in the region. On the other hand, Iran’s railroad has been connecting the landlocked Central Asian countries to Bandar Abbas port city in southern Iran through Sarakhs railroad since 1996.

Iran's east-west railroad was also made operational after the country's national railroad was connected to Zahidan-Mirjaveh border crossing in eastern Iran on the border with Pakistan. This railroad connects Pakistan in the east to Turkey in the west. This is important because it operates within the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Inauguration of the East Caspian railroad among Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in October 2014, has connected Iran's rail network to Central Asia and Russia on the northeast of the Caspian Sea. The movement of the Silk Road train from China to Iran, which took 12 days and reached Iran on February 15, 2016, was a hallmark in the history of regional rail transportation. At present, Iran's railroad network is 13,000 kilometers long and connects Iran to neighboring countries along the "north-south" and "east-west" axes.

Iran's Rail Projects

1) *Iran's rail connection with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan on the east of the Caspian Sea.* Inauguration of the Gorgan-Incheboroun railroad in August 2015 opened Iran's rail access to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. It was through this route that the first steps to revive the rail Silk Road and facilitate transportation of Iranian cargoes to China and from there to Europe were taken in February 2016. At that time, the first freight train arrived in Iran from China; a development, which materialized a trilateral rail transport cooperation agreement, which had been signed by Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

At present, the Iranian railroad is connected to railroads of neighboring countries at five points:

- Razi border crossing with Turkey (in the northwest of Iran);
- Jolfa border crossing with Nakhichevan (in the northwest of Iran) and through that crossing to Armenia's railroad, which has been blocked since 1988. Negotiations are underway with both Azerbaijan and Armenia to reopen that border crossing, but it is inactive at the present time;
- Incheboroun border crossing (in the southeast coast of the Caspian Sea);
- Sarakhs railroad (in the northeast of Iran), which was inaugurated more than 15 years ago;
- Mirjaveh border crossing (in the east of Iran) in Sistan and Baluchestan province, which connects Iran to Pakistan.

At present, establishing rail connections with the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Afghanistan is on Iran's agenda to complete the country's rail network with neighboring countries.

2) *Iran-Azerbaijan rail connection.* An agreement between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan for establishment of a rail connection between the two countries was finalized in October 2015 through a meeting of the Iran-Azerbaijan Joint Economic Cooperation Commission (known as the Astara-Astara meeting) and the final document for this rail connection was signed. Inauguration of this rail

link was an important step toward the realization of Iran's goals for developing rail transit. Construction of this 10–km rail connection started in late April 2016. It can be considered the most important foreign rail connection for Iran. Since Iran shares many economic and transit interests with Azerbaijan, the two countries have agreed on establishing this connection and it has been decided that Azerbaijan would provide Iran with 500 million Euros for the completion of this rail line. On the other hand, the Iranian government is to undertake provision of funds for the construction of a section of the railroad and acquisition of land across its path in order to implement this joint project. When this rail connection becomes fully operational, it would connect Iran's national railroad to that of Russia.

Iran will also establish a transit terminal with a capacity of five million tons at this border crossing. Iran and Azerbaijan are also expected to work on building a rail bridge, which will run for 80 meters over the Astara–Chai border river (which forms the border between the Iranian city of Astara and the city of Astara in Azerbaijan) with a 50–percent share for each country. As announced by officials, construction of this rail route will increase the volume of trade between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan by 400%. Construction of a railroad connecting the three cities of Qazvin, Rasht and Astara on the Iranian side will link Iran's domestic railroad to this rail connection. The rail connection between Iran and Azerbaijan will complete a rail route, which runs for 5,200 kilometers from India to the Port of Helsinki in Northern Europe and will reduce the needed time for transport of cargo along the International North–South Transport Corridor from 45 days to 20 days.

3) Iran–Iraq rail connection. The decision to build the “Iran–Iraq” joint railroad, which is also known as the “Basra–Shalamcheh” railroad, dates back to the signing of a memorandum of understanding for development of rail cooperation between Iran and Iraq in January 2015. That agreement entered the implementation phase in April 2015 through a ceremony attended by Iran's minister of road and urban development and Iraq's minister of transportation at the border crossing. Meanwhile, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani recently expressed hope that after the finalization of the project, Iranians would be able to go on pilgrimage trips to the Holy Shrines in Iraq by train in 2017.

There is an existing railroad, which runs for 13 kilometers from the Iranian port city of Khorramshahr to Shalamcheh and the new railroad, which is going to be constructed, will extend for 33 kilometers from Shalamcheh border crossing to Basra port on the Iraqi soil and it must be constructed by the Iraqi side. Iran's share of the rail connection with Iraq is construction of a bridge over the Arvand River and Iran is currently waiting for the Iraqi side to start building the 33–km railroad from Shalamcheh to Basra before beginning the construction of the aforesaid bridge. Inauguration of Shalamcheh–Basra railroad will connect the Iranian rail network to Iraq and East Mediterranean countries through Khorramshahr and will provide new momentum to transit and transport of goods and passengers. Among the most important achievements of this rail connection one can point to the use of railroad instead of road to transport a large part of imported and exported goods between Iran and Iraq in addition to the movement of passengers between the two countries.

4) *Khaf-Herat railroad*. The rail connection between Iran and Afghanistan will complete Iran's rail links to its neighboring countries. To achieve this goal, construction of a railroad connecting the Iranian city of Khaf (in Northern Khorasan province) to the city of Herat (in the west of Afghanistan) has been on agenda since 2014. Of course, construction of this railroad has been finished in Afghanistan up to the Iranian border and only part of this route remains to be built in Iran. Necessary credits for construction of this part have been appropriated in Iran's 2016 budget and it is expected to be finished before the end of the first half of the Iranian calendar year, 1395 (which started March 20, 2016). Construction of this railroad will not only solve the problem that faces transport of minerals from Iran to other regional countries, but will also offer Afghanistan with new opportunities for trade. Officials in the two countries hope that construction of this railroad would be finished by the end of the current Iranian year (ends March 20, 2017) when this project is expected to be inaugurated.

Ports

Having 2,043 kilometers of shoreline in its south – including 1,358 kilometers along the Persian Gulf and 796 kilometers along the Sea of Oman – in addition to 675 kilometers of sea border in the Caspian Sea, Iran enjoys considerable environmental and economic potentialities for the development of regional cooperation.

In the Persian Gulf region, Iran's Shahid Rajaei port exchanges goods and conducts trade with more than 80 famous ports of the world through the world's 35 top container carrier lines. Shahid Rajaei port complex can accommodate 70 million tons of commodities a year and has 36 dock posts in addition to the biggest and most advanced container terminal in the country. After completion of the second phase of its development plan, Shahid Rajaei port will have a capacity to accommodate 5.8 million TEU of containers per year and will be handling a vast amount of public goods.

This humongous port complex, which serves as the main gateway for Iran's imports and exports and regulator of the Iranian economy, has taken a long stride toward globalization by claiming a bigger share of the marine transport and international trade in recent years. In order to rank first among regional ports, special plans have been made according to Iran's 20-Year Perspective Plan (Vision 2025) to develop and boost efficiency of this port and encourage private sector investment. As a result, more than 9,000 billion rials (about 260 million dollars) of private sector capital has been so far attracted to this port.

As a result of these efforts, Shahid Rajaei port registered an annual growth of 46 percent in 2011, which caused its ranking among 3,500 important ports of the world to improve by 28 points from 72nd to 44th.

Imam Khomeini port is also located to the northwest of the Persian Gulf and is considered one of the most important Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf with an annual capacity of about 55 million tons. Having 38 dock posts over a stretch of seven kilometers, this port can accommodate high-capacity vessels. Access

to an airport as well as communication roads and railroad network are among advantages of this port.

With regard to *the Sea of Oman*, major Iranian ports include Jask port and the country's sole port with access to the ocean, which is *Shahid Beheshti port* in Chabahar. The port city of Chabahar, which is located close to free waters and is the sole Iranian port with access to the ocean, can reduce strategic bottlenecks which the country has faced in the Persian Gulf and play the role of an important port of entry in the eastern part of the country. Therefore, the development of Chabahar port city can attract international liner ships and account for a remarkable share of the Persian Gulf market.

After development of the Chabahar port city and completion of the "southeast-northeast transit corridor" from Chabahar to Sarakhs, ships will certainly choose Chabahar for offloading and onloading of goods in order to reduce fuel consumption and cost and also to save time. Iran is planning to transfer an important part of its oil export terminals from the Persian Gulf to the eastern coasts of the Sea of Oman in Chabahar in the future. Implementation of this plan will lead to the development of southeastern region of the country.

Caspian Sea

In the Caspian Sea region, Anzali port, Amirabad port and Noshahr port are the most important Iranian ports. Anzali port is a multipurpose commercial port and the Caspian port, which is located close to it and within the bounds of the Anzali Free Trade and Industrial Zone, will turn into an active zone in the future when completion of the railroad connecting the cities of Qazvin, Rasht, Anzali and Astar is finished. Amirabad port enjoys good logistic facilities for oil swap with littoral countries of the Caspian Sea and can swap up to one million barrels of crude oil per day after Iran restarts the swap deal with neighboring countries, thus playing a remarkable role in development of the regional economy. Noshahr port is also very active in the field of offloading and onloading of general commodities.

Shipping

At present, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) Group is known as a worthy global partner for commodity owners and other customers due to about half a century of brilliant activity in the field of global marine transport and also because of its secure international network and the ability to provide diverse and rapid transportation services, which exceed the customers' expectations.

The IRISL Group possesses a powerful and diversified fleet of oceangoing ships and service vessels at a capacity proportionate to market needs, which is active along all international marine routes. The group's ships call at most important ports of the world to transport commodities in addition to providing diverse and modern services such as door-to-door services.

On the other hand, the National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC) is currently the world's biggest tanker company by having 42 VLCC (very large crude carriers)

supertankers. This company transports Iran's crude oil to export markets and is also active in reciprocal oil trade by carrying oil consignments for some of the world's 150 major oil companies, including the Royal-Dutch Shell, France's Total, Saudi Arabia's Aramco, and the state-run oil companies of Kuwait and Abu Dhabi.

The Caspian Sea Shipping Lines Company started its activities in 1992 and is currently operating 24 vessels carrying cargos belonging to businesspeople and various industries between Iran's northern ports and foreign ports in the Caspian Sea region. The company's main goals include development of Iran's national and commercial fleet in the Caspian Sea, developing the activities of Iranian shipping lines at all littoral ports of the Caspian Sea, development and optimization of marine transport, and establishing a presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran's national fleet in the Caspian Sea region in view of the rising volume of trade, as well as commercial and economic exchanges across the Caspian Sea. The Caspian Sea Shipping Lines Company, as Iran's sole flag carrier in the Caspian Sea, transports cargo across the Caspian Sea, the Volga-Don Canal, and the Black Sea and provides transportation, transit, and combined transport services to all ports along the aforesaid routes. The company handled 2.15 million tons of cargo in the Caspian Sea throughout the Iranian calendar year 1394 (2015-16). The company accounts for 32 percent of a total of six million tons of cargo offloading and onloading in Iran's northern ports. The Caspian Sea Shipping Lines Company is Iran's biggest commercial fleet in the Caspian Sea and accounts for 31 percent of total marine transport in the Caspian Sea.

Iran's Transportation Routes in the Caspian Sea

Iran and Russia consider themselves as two neighboring countries (though without land borders). In this context they should have taken advantage of the existing land transport facilities (including the land route through the Republic of Azerbaijan at the border with Dagestan), of the Caspian Sea and air transport routes, but these potentialities have, unfortunately, received less than adequate attention. Since the outbreak of armed conflicts between Chechens and the central government of Russia in the middle of the 1990s, Iran's land route through the Republic of Azerbaijan has been cut and the border crossing near the historical city of Derbent on the Russian Federation's border with the Republic of Azerbaijan has been closed to Iranian passengers and cargo trucks. Therefore, all Iranian export goods to Russia, especially fruits and vegetables, crossed this border post aboard non-Iranian trucks registered to Turks or Azeri nationals of the Republic of Azerbaijan. As a result, the cost price of all Iranian goods increased in the Russian markets and, due to these conditions, Iran lost those markets in competition with Turks and Azeris. Iran has frequently asked Russia to open this border crossing to Iranian trucks and Russians have given promises in this regard, none of which has been fulfilled so far. Therefore, high-volume trade exchanges between Iran and Russia are handled through the Caspian Sea between Iranian and Russian ports, but even these exchanges are limited to freighters and do not include passenger ships.

Air routes between Iran and Russia

Unfortunately, since the opening of air routes between the two countries within the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), there has been only one flight between Iran and Russia, which connects Tehran to Moscow. This has remained unchanged since the Soviet period. However, Iran's northwestern neighbor, Turkey, conducts many flights to various cities in both the European and Asian parts of Russia.

Following the establishment of regular marine transport lines from Iran's northern ports to the port cities of Astrakhan in Russia and Aktau in Kazakhstan, which were inaugurated in June 2015 to help Iranian businessmen and exporters ship their goods to Astrakhan port, a regular flight between Tehran and Astrakhan was also planned. The flight connecting Tehran to Astrakhan fortunately started in early June 2016 and is expected to greatly reduce time and cost of trade with Russia as well as the cost of access to Astrakhan port. Establishment of this flight, which is scheduled to be twice a week, followed requests by Iranian businesspeople, merchants and the private sector, and it can help facilitate economic cooperation between the two countries.

Iran's plans to Develop Air Transport

When Iran announced that it needs 500 new aircraft to renovate its aging air fleet, many airplane manufacturing companies indicated their willingness to be present in the Iranian market. Finally, Airbus and Boeing managed to sign preliminary agreements in order to sell airplanes to Iran. Immediately following the conclusion of Iran's nuclear deal, which is known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran's president paid a visit to France during which a contract was signed with the Airbus to buy 118 airplanes. According to Iran's minister of road and urban development, the French side has promised to give Airbus jets to Iran over a period of 16 years. The purchased aircraft include 45 Airbus A320, 45 Airbus A330, 16 Airbus A350, and 12 Airbus A380 airplanes. The Iranian minister of road and urban development also announced that Iran was planning to buy 100 Boeing airplanes as well.

International North–South Transport Corridor, a Factor for Regional Cooperation between Iran and Russia

Iran's situation as a crossroads in the region has great potential, which has been frequently mentioned by Iranians and non-Iranians. Iran enjoys suitable capacities in terms of transportation infrastructure, including rail and road transportation, ports, and commercial services such as loading, offloading, storage and distribution of commodities. The International North–South Transport Corridor is one of Iran's infrastructural options, which has received less than adequate attention. Under present conditions, it seems necessary to pay more attention to this corridor.

The International North–South Transport Corridor project was launched in 2000 by Russia, India and Iran with the goal of establishing a shorter transportation route compared to the Suez Canal marine route in order to reduce transportation

time and the overall cost of commodity trade. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Oman, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey joined the project a few years later.

Some factors, however, have stopped implementation of this project over the past 15 years. Major factors, which barred development of this corridor included mounting pressure on Iran's economy by the United States and member countries of the European Union over Iran's nuclear program in the early 2000s and Russia's unwillingness to take part in this project due to legal barriers created by anti-Iran sanctions in addition to India's unwillingness to take practical steps to invest in this project. Now that sanctions have been removed, Iran is able to activate this corridor. Operations along the corridor will increase regional trade exchanges, energize trade services, develop international trade by member countries, create new jobs, and help overall economic development of the region.

Major goals and reasons behind implementation of the International North-South Transport Corridor project are as follows:

- Development of transportation relations in order to regulate transport of goods and passengers along the International North-South Transport Corridor,
- Increasing access of parties to this agreement to global markets by providing them with rail, road, marine, river and air transportation services,
- Increasing the volume of international transport of goods and passengers,
- Ensuring secure travel and security of products in addition to protecting the environment according to international standards,
- Coordinating transportation policies and passing necessary transportation laws and regulations in line with the goals of this agreement,
- Providing equal conditions for providers of all types of goods and passenger transportation services to countries that are parties to this agreement within framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor.

Investment Made in Implementing the International North-South Transport Corridor

Investment by the United Arab Emirates, which includes building two Freeport ships for the Persian Gulf region, construction of docks for Freeport vessels and construction of a railroad station in Dubai port;

Investment to be made by Iran includes construction of Freeport docks in Bandar Abbas, construction of Freeport docks in Shahid Rajaei port (in Bandar Abbas), construction of Freeport docks in Amirabad port, and construction of a railroad station in Amirabad port;

Investment to be made by the Russian Federation within the framework of this project includes construction of port and infrastructural facilities in the city of Lagan, construction of Freeport docks in Lagan, building 34 Freeport vessels for Caspian Sea transport, and building four towboats for container shipments.

Practical realization of plans made within framework of the International North–South Transport Corridor requires attention to the following issues:

- Improvement and development of the corridor’s management structures,
- Promoting unity among the corridor’s members within framework of its regulations,
- More attention to infrastructural requirements of the corridor by governments,
- Increasing the volume of cargo transport through all routes and in both directions.

From a geopolitical viewpoint, transport of goods through the International North–South Transport Corridor will not only have many benefits for Iran, but also strengthen Iran’s standing in the Caspian Sea region, because Iran plays an axial role in this corridor. From a strategic standpoint, under critical conditions in international free waters when shipping traffic hits barriers, this corridor can be used to guarantee the free flow of goods. Since Iran is the gravitational center of this corridor, making the corridor operational will be beneficial to Iran from various viewpoints. This mechanism is also a means of upgrading Iran’s geographical position to a geopolitical position.

Transit

Unfortunately, due to anti–Iran sanctions and aging of the country’s land transportation fleet, difficulties associated with rail transport, inefficiency of some ports of entry and exit due to various reasons such as insecurity in Afghanistan and inefficient customs systems in Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, and also due to customs barriers like corruption of customs officers and prevalent bribery in those republics, these routes are less appealing to truck owners and economically active people. Therefore, despite having good logistic facilities and great advantages of its transportation networks, as well as storage and port facilities, Iran has been less active in transit of goods even compared with the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Figures related to transit of goods through Iran and the quantity of transited goods clearly prove the role and importance of the International North–South Transport Corridor in boosting transit through the country. This role will become even more significant once necessary infrastructure is fully provided. However, a review of Iran’s transit performance will show that the East–West Transport Corridor is still playing a low–key role in the country, because transit of goods is predominantly taking place through northern and southern border crossings. On the other hand, existence of suitable infrastructure at ports of entry and exit will greatly increase the share of such points in country’s economy. In view of more suitable cargo onloading and offloading facilities and due to having Shahid Rajaei port, the city of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran is currently claiming the biggest share of goods transit in the country. Paying equal attention to ports of entry and exit in north, south, east and west of the country, which complement international transport corridors, will strengthen Iran’s standing in this industry. Presence of

Turkey, which connects Asia to Europe, along Iran's northwestern border, and propinquity to countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, which are in dire need of importing raw materials, are among the existing potentials for activation of Iran's East-West Transport Corridor.

The total tonnage transited via the Islamic Republic of Iran's railroads increased by 50 percent in 2014 compared with 2013, with most of that rise being a result of increased transit of cotton, lumber and containers. Cotton accounts for the highest amount of transit through Iran's railroads, making up more than one-fourth (26 percent) of the total rail cargo transit.

More than 99 percent of cotton shipments entered Iran through Sarakhs border crossing and left the country through Bandar Abbas during 2013 and 2014. Most lumber consignments entered the country through Razi border crossing during the same period. Sarakhs border crossing was the port of entry for the highest cargo tonnage totaling 331 tons in 2013 and 2014, which later left the country through Bandar Abbas.

Available statistics and data show that during March 21, 2015 to March 19, 2016, a total of 10.919 million tons of goods were transited through the country, showing a reduction of 11.5 percent compared to the corresponding period of the preceding year.

The largest amount of goods transited through Iran during the same 12 months consisted of various types of fuel (42 percent), as well as different types of cotton, chemical compounds, construction material, and home appliances with a 4-percent share for each category. Instruments, medicine, various types of leather and other articles accounted for more than 2.105 million tons of goods transited during the same period, which have been put under the "miscellaneous" category.

Topic 10. Trade and Economic Relations between Iran and Russia: Potential and Achievements

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The Current Status of Trade and Economic Relations between Russia and Iran: Obstacles to Realizing its Potential

The growth in bilateral trade between Russia and Iran that had been reported since 2000, and which peaked in 2010–2011, was disrupted by the tightened regime of sanctions against Iran in 2010–2012.²¹⁸ In 2013, bilateral trade between Russia and Iran fell by almost 60 percent to USD 1.6 billion.

Table 1. Bilateral Trade between Russia and Iran in 2010–2015 (million U.S. dollars)

Year	Export	Import	Trade
2010	3,378	272	3,650
2011	3,400	350	3,750
2012	1,900	430	2,330
2013	1,170	430	1,600
2014	1,327	355	1,682

Source: Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation. Foreign economic information portal. Sorted by country.

URL: http://www.ved.gov.ru/monitoring/foreign_trade_statistics/countries_breakdown

Although Iran accounts for less than 1 percent of Russia’s foreign trade, it remains a significant market for Russian industrial commodities, as fuel products make up more than 71 percent of the country’s exports.²¹⁹ Even in 2014, when Russia markedly increased its grain deliveries to Iran (40 percent of Russia’s total supplies), industrial goods accounted for more than half of the country’s exports. Russia has enjoyed a consistent surplus in trade with Iran in both commodities and services (mostly due to maintenance services for the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant).

Certain progress was observed in economic cooperation between Iran and Russia following the approval of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna on July 15, 2015; however, it was not until the second half of 2015 and early 2016 that a real increase in bilateral trade was reported. In January–March 2016, a 22.1 percent increase in mutual trade was recorded from the first quarter of 2015, with Russian exports climbing 25.6 percent year–on–year.²²⁰

²¹⁸ Mamedova N.M. Cooperation between Russia and Iran: Correlation between Economic and Geopolitical Interests // Russia–Iran Relations. Challenges and Prospects. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. 2015, pp. 56–57.

²¹⁹ World Trade Organization. URL: http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/anrep_e/trade_profiles12.pdf (accessed on 12.05.2016).

²²⁰ Foreign countries trade statistics // Integrated foreign economic information portal. URL: http://www.ved.gov.ru/monitoring/foreign_trade_statistics/countries_breakdown (accessed on 05.06.2016) (in Russian).

Russian business grew more active as soon as certain legal acts came into effect. On 11 March 2016, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree for the country to comply with the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, i.e. on the lifting of sanctions by Russia.²²¹ According to the document, in the period to 18 October 2025, Russian organizations will be required to receive preliminary authorization from the UN Security Council to deliver, sell, or directly transfer to Iran “all the items on the List of nuclear materials, equipment, special non-nuclear materials and the corresponding technologies subject to export control.”²²² This is a crucial requirement for Russia to resume its military and technical cooperation with Iran. The regulatory framework for bilateral cooperation includes the Minutes of the 12th session of the Russia–Iran Permanent Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation that was held in Moscow in 2016 and agreements that Vladimir Putin reached in the course of his visit to Iran in November 2015. The decision to lift the ban on the sale of S–300 anti-missile systems to Iran became an important landmark in the promotion of military and technical cooperation between the two countries. The modified version of the S–300 system will be available to Iran under the terms of the contract.

The expansion of economic relations can naturally become a factor to set the tone for our short- and long-term relationships:

The main obstacles to further expansion of collaboration can be divided into two categories. The former includes external factors, such as

1. The perturbed relations between the West and Russia. In the new, more complicated, framework, Iran can make use of the Russian factor to encourage western players to use Iran’s energy and transit potential;
2. Remaining sanctions against Iran, especially the U.S. energy sanctions that can slow down the involvement of Russian companies in oil and gas projects, which were agreed previously;
3. The U.S. and the European Union may put pressure on some transport projects involving Russia, primarily joint railway projects with Iran;
4. Another inhibitor is the low energy prices that will remain in the short run — energy export is the main source of foreign exchange revenues for both Russia and Iran and forms the financial foundation for further growth of their industrial capacity. This is especially important for Russia as a supplier of industrial products to Iran, albeit with a low share of value added;
5. Both countries mostly cater for the markets of Europe and East Asia.

The second category of obstacles includes the following:

1. There is an obvious lack of diversity in Russian and Iranian export supplies — energy prevails in both countries’ trade;
2. Neither country has a clear program for the promotion of bilateral relations;

²²¹ Russian Federation Presidential Decree 109 of 11/03/2016 “On measures to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2231 of 20 July 2015”. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40611>

²²² URL: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/2095793.html>

3. Bigger companies that are closely associated with the state and are therefore more vulnerable to sanctions dominate in the structure of exporting organizations of Russia and Iran;
4. Russia and Iran have no joint banking and insurance institutions;
5. Expertise on the import/export potential and peculiarities of doing business is limited;
6. The level of social and cultural relations remains low.

Russia's Competition for the Iranian Market

The commencement of the JCPOA implementation brought about fierce international competition for the Iranian market. Contracts worth billions of U.S. dollars have been signed with Europe, China, and India. However, most companies have chosen to take their time, although they are ready to go into action. Agreements with China and India (on the port of Chabahar) seem to be the most probable option for Iran in the short term. There are few specific contracts, though, and time will be required for European companies to come back to Iran²²³. French and Italian automotive companies may return to Iran in the short run to compete with Chinese car makers. Russian companies can make use of Iran's attempts to limit the import of Chinese-made components in order to approach the Iranian market.

Turkey is also interested in furthering its relations with Iran, according to Turkey's new prime minister, Binali Yildirim. Turkey's interest in Iranian natural gas, including for further transit to Europe, means that Russia will have to be up against a more serious competition for the European market. However, the gas pipeline project would require Iran to increase its natural gas production, and given the fact that the Peace pipeline to Pakistan has been put into operation and the construction of a gas pipeline to Iraq has been completed, Russian companies will most probably be involved in the development of the South Pars²²⁴. The planned construction of LNG-making facilities²²⁵ will increase competition in the LNG market and therefore reduce competition between Iran and Russia over the choice of gas pipeline routes. It is highly likely that Russia's (Gazprom's) positions will remain unchanged in the short term despite Iran's export plans, while Gazprom's role in the production of natural gas in Iran will grow more prominent.

Main Areas for Trade and Cooperation: Growth Prospects

There are not so many industries in Russia and Iran capable of competing internationally²²⁶. Traditional Russian exports to Iran include metals, wood and wood

²²³ Maysam B. EU eyes return as Iran's first trade partner // *Al-monitor*, June 1, 2016. URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/iran-eu-trade-relations-post-jcpoa-mogherini-tehran.html#ixzz4AaocXQdX>

²²⁴ Iran after the lifting of sanctions is going to become a major gas exporter // *Vedomosti*, 23 May 23:34. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2016/05/24/642111-iran-posle-snyatiya-sanktsii-gotovitsya-stat-krupnim-eksporterom-gaza> (in Russian).

²²⁵ URL: http://www.polpred.com/?ns=1&ns_id=1769254 (oilru.com. 24.05. 2016)

²²⁶ Gholamreza Shafei. Iranian pessimism towards Russia is one of the reasons hindering further economic cooperation. URL: <http://www.iras.ir/iras.iren/doc/interview/1190/gholamreza-shafei-iranian-pessimism-towards-russia-is-one-of-the-reasons-hinderin> (accessed on 5 May 2016).

products, electrical machines and equipment, paper and cardboard, and floating structures. In 2014, grain supplies from Russia for the first time exceeded metal export; however, grain remains a volatile Iranian import. In 2016, Iran does not expect to make any major grain purchases from foreign countries. On the other hand, import of farm produce from Iran becomes increasingly important for Russia: in 2014, vegetables, fruit and processed fruit and vegetables accounted for more than 81 percent of Iranian supplies to Russia.²²⁷ Since 2015, Russia has imported Iranian fish and seafood, and in 2016, 25 Iranian companies were authorized to export food products to Russia. Russia reduced duties on fish and dairy imported from Iran, and in 2016, Iran is ready to supply more than 1 million tons of dairy products to Russia. Also in 2016, Russia will begin supplying poultry meat, venison, and beef to Iran.²²⁸

Iran has a broad market for automobiles, and a social program has been launched to replace old trucks. Competition is fierce in this market; however, it remains quite promising. So far, KAMAZ has been the only Russian company in that market, but GAZ might join it, given the fact that the cooperation project between GAZ and Iran's Zamyad has been included in the Minutes of the 12th meeting of the Permanent Russia–Iran Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation (item 3.13).

In the fuel and energy sector, Iran is obviously interested in the harmonization of the energy policies of the two countries — the routes of export gas pipelines, including within the framework of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), crude production volumes, and supplies of electricity to the neighboring countries of Russia and Iran. Iran continuously voices its interest in having NOVATEK involved in the development of South Pars and invites Rosneft, Zarubezhneft, Gazpromneft, Lukoil, Tatneft and other Russian companies to participate in its oil and gas projects²²⁹. Since more than 15 percent of electricity is lost due to worn-out networks in Iran, Russian companies can profit from Iranian modernization projects.

The market for the construction of nuclear power plants remains potentially profitable for Russia. On 11 November 2014, the two countries signed the contract to build two new power units at Bushehr, and an agreement was reached on the construction of eight units for nuclear power plants based on Russian technologies. Incidentally, in 2016, Iran signed an agreement with China envisaging the construction of two nuclear power plants.

Prior to the imposition of sanctions, Iran used to be the world's third-largest buyer of Russian arms. In the foreseeable future, trade in weapons may be impeded by not only JCPOA-related limitations on military and technical cooperation, but also possible sales of arms to Ukraine by Israel.²³⁰

²²⁷ Calculation based on sources of Integrated foreign economic information portal.

URL: http://www.ved.gov.ru/monitoring/foreign_trade_statistics/countries (accessed on-3.05.2016) (in Russian).

²²⁸ Iran intends to import from Russia venison // Vestifinance, 19.01.2016.

URL: <http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/66425> (in Russian).

²²⁹ Minutes of the 12th meeting of the Permanent Russia–Iran Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation. 10-12 November 2015. "NOVATEK" and LUKOIL go to Iran after the lifting sanctions // Znak. Internet-gazeta. URL: https://www.znak.com/2016-01-25/novatek_i_lukoil_zahodyat_v_iran_posle_snyatiya_so_strany_sankcii (in Russian).

²³⁰ Katz M.N. Iran and Russia // The Iran Primer.

URL: <http://www.iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-russia> (accessed on 26.05.2016).

In the aviation sector, supplies of the Sukhoi Superjet 100 passenger jet have potential to become a major trade project. However, just as in the automotive sector, the main challenge is the capacity of the Russian manufacturer and quality of aircraft. Sales in the Iranian market could improve cost recovery for Sukhoi.²³¹

Iran is looking to resume scientific and technical cooperation in the space industry. Promising short-term projects include Earth remote sensing, including exchange of data from the Russian space vehicle Resurs-P, and development and launch of space probes by Russian specialists for Iranian customers. In the medium term, Russia may be involved in the creation and launch of man-made satellites.

Russian companies have resumed their activities in traditional areas for cooperation — construction and modernization of Iranian railways and construction of power plants. Russia has extended a EUR 2.5 billion loan for the implementation of infrastructure projects in Iran (including for the modernization of the Garmsar–Inche Burun railway, completion of the Rasht–Astara railway, and construction of a thermal power plant in Bandar Abbas)²³².

There is still substantial tourism potential that needs to be fulfilled. Although Russia saw a sharp increase in the number of Iranian tourists in 2016, Russian travelers are still discouraged from visiting Iran because of the need to comply with sharia laws in their everyday life.

Because of the modified structure of Russian export deliveries, customs cooperation has become an important area for engagement. In May 2016, the Agreement on Bilateral Cooperation for 2016–2017 was signed to create a framework for the exchange of information about commodities and vehicles, and customs value of goods transported across the border.

Cooperation Opportunities in Innovative Development, Scientific and Technical Cooperation

The main objective of the “academic jihad” declared by Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei is to accelerate scientific and technical innovations. According to the long-term plan to 2025, the share of research in GDP will reach 2.5 percent.²³³ IT is in the focus of the program. In May 2016, Teheran played host to the 5th International Exhibition of Innovation and Technology, in which 91 Iranian and 23 Russian companies participated. A cooperation agreement was signed between Russian Nanocertifica and the Iran Nanotechnology Initiative Council. The deal envisages joint testing of products, improvement of assessment methodologies, and promotion of safety in the nanoindustry, as well as development of measuring and testing techniques.²³⁴ On 1 June 2016, Iran and Rusnano agreed to

²³¹ Tsatirian S., Nersinyan L. Whom Iran deploys bayonets against? // Regnum news agency, August 02, 2015. URL: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1948282.html> (in Russian) (accessed on: 4.05.2016).

²³² Russia to provide Iran with €2.5 billion infrastructure loan // Russia Today, 6 Jun, 2016. URL: <https://www.rt.com/business/345566-russia-iran-loan-money> (in Russian) (accessed on 4.05.2016).

²³³ A Summary of Selected Technology Achievements in the IRI. Tehran, 2012. P. 18.

²³⁴ The 5th International Exhibition of Innovation and Technology Inotex 2016 has opened // Russian-Iranian Business Council. The Chamber of Commerce of the Russian Federation, 22.05.2016. URL: https://www.rus-im.tpprf.ru/ru/news/?CODE=otkrylas_5yamezhdnarodnayavystavkainnovatsiyitekhnologiyinotex2016_1136529; URL: <http://www.news.nano.ir/54455/1> (in Russian) (accessed on 22 May 2016)

establish a joint investment fund — the signatories are working on the list of joint projects and the legal framework²³⁵.

Technology parks and clusters are being established across Iran (in 2014, 30 new parks were set up). The primary user of state-of-the-art communications systems is the Iranian Army, which tests new types of missiles and torpedoes.²³⁶ However, the quality of communication in the country, even of mobile communication (which accounts for almost 73 percent of industry revenues) lags three to five years behind global trends. Network coverage is uneven, and broadband access provides low connection rates. Therefore, the establishment of LTE (high-speed wireless data transfer for cell phones), trans-Caspian cable project, construction of Wi-Fi networks, import of network equipment, and supplies of telephones (China is currently the main supplier) can become appealing areas for cooperation. What is important, IT is a restricted state-controlled industry. Local companies produce a small proportion of telecoms equipment that is in use in Iran. The share of ICT in export and import remains very low, less than 1 percent and 4 percent, respectively. New companies will likely appear in this market, given that Iran is establishing data processing centers, manufacturing microchips (using foreign licenses), displays, printers, cell phones, etc. Iran hopes IT cooperation, including the implementation of the telecommunications ring project around the Caspian Sea (involving joint Russia-Azerbaijan company C-Ring Telecom and Iran Mobile Electronics Development Company), will enable it to follow in Russia's footsteps and become a global exporter of IT services in the medium term.²³⁷

Exchange of pharmaceutical technologies is one more potential area for cooperation. In 2016, Sobhan Recombinant Protein, a major Iranian manufacturer, and Russia's Petrovax Pharm signed an agreement envisaging the production of a flu vaccine in Iran with the use of Russian solutions. Petrovax Pharm will contribute its manufacturing technology and provide professional training of Iranian specialists. Another joint project envisages the transfer of a Hepatitis B vaccine production method by Iran's Sobhan to the Russian company.²³⁸ The Russian market is currently facing a deficit of medications, whereas according to Iran's sixth five-year plan (2015/16–2020/21) the pharmaceutical sector will become Iran's export industry that will develop medications to treat cancer, diabetes, and blood disorders.

Recommendations for the Expansion of Bilateral Economic Relations

Trade, scientific, and technical relations should be promoted within the framework of both bilateral relationship and regional organizations, specifically the SCO and the EEU.

²³⁵ "RUSNANO" and Iran will establish a joint investment fund // Russia Today, June 1, 2016.

URL: <https://www.russian.rt.com/article/305541-rosnano-i-iran-sozhdadut-sovmestnyi-fond> (in Russian).

²³⁶ URL: <http://www.polpred.com//iran.ru>. 24.05.2016 No. 1767723 (accessed on 25 May 2016).

²³⁷ Obukhova A.N. Import-export capacity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Report at the conference "Iran in the second decade of the 21st century". Moscow: Institute for Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 11.01.2015.

²³⁸ Russia and Iran share drug production technologies // TASS, May 25.

URL: <http://www.tass.ru/obschestvo/3311793> (in Russian).

With a view to expanding economic ties it is advised to

1. diversify Russian export. Because competition has grown increasingly serious in the Iranian market following the lifting of sanctions, Iran cannot be regarded as a consumer of cheap poor-quality products and sci-tech services (especially in the mining, oil-processing, and gas industries);
2. develop bilateral cooperation programs for the short, medium, and long term perspective, given Iran's long-term plan to 2025 and five-year plans. Cooperation programs should envisage involvement in technology parks and development of not only projects, but also production chains that ensure long-term collaboration;
3. ensure marketing support through the publication of a permanent joint bulletin or a website focusing on the status of the Iranian and Russian markets, key manufacturers in Iran and Russia, importers, service centers, and national business peculiarities. It is also recommended to establish websites with catalogues of Russian products in English or Farsi;
4. step up the involvement of Russian and Iranian market players in national free trade areas — in Iran's Anzali Free Trade-Industrial Zone (on the Caspian Sea) and Aras, and in Russia's Alabuga (Tatarstan), Agidel (Bashkortostan), Kaluga-Yug, Severny (Belgorod Region), etc.;
5. begin preparations of an agreement to create a special free trade area between the EEU and Iran;
6. unlock the potential of participation in regional organizations and projects (the International North-South Transport Corridor, railways and highways, the Silk Road Economic Belt project, the EEU, and the SCO). The implementation of joint initiatives with Iran in the format of regional projects will enhance the position of Russian companies in Iran and across the region, and weaken potential limitations that may be imposed by the West. Russia's engagement in the Silk Road Economic Belt project initiated by China seems to be the most effective initiative, as it involves the use of the territory of Iran to promote deliveries of Chinese goods to Europe and of Persian Gulf resources to China;
7. given the experience of doing business in Iran during the regime of sanctions, when major Russian companies that were cooperation leaders had to leave that country, it is important to encourage the participation of SMB in bilateral trade. New organizational structures are required in order to effectively involve a broad range of Iranian and Russian entrepreneurs in trade operations — foreign trade associations of small and medium business and joint small business chambers of commerce and industry that enjoy certain preferences (tax and loan benefits). The application of preferential policies to cooperatives in Iran makes it possible to establish joint cooperative societies or unions. Associations of these formats can be especially effective in cooperation projects between provinces and regions of Iran and Russia;
8. establish joint banking and insurance structures, open branches of commercial banks in free areas. The USD 5 billion credit line offered by Russia and Vnesheconombank's USD 2 billion credit line for the Central Bank of Iran will con-

tribute to the implementation of industrial, transportation, and financial projects;

9. establish joint transportation companies with up-to-date equipment to ensure the original quality of goods, given Iran's increasing role as an important supplier of farm produce to the Russian market over the past 24 months;

10. simplify visa formalities and conclude an intergovernmental agreement on visa-free travel for organized groups of tourists;

11. foster scientific and cultural connections. The operation of cultural centers of Iran in Russia has proved effective for the establishment of contacts with public officials and business communities of Iran. It is therefore advisable that Russia should open a cultural center in Iran.

The target for Russia and Iran to bring bilateral trade up to USD 10 billion and more in the medium and long term²³⁹ may have been set too high; however, the fact that it was officially defined as a state objective is of crucial importance. The positive trend in our economic relations is quite obvious and increases the likelihood of multiple expansion in our scientific, technical, and economic cooperation.

²³⁹ Iran, Russia Finalize Historic Customs Agreement // Financial Tribune, March 03, 2016. URL: <http://www.financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/37574/iran-russia-finalize-historic-customs-agreement> (accessed on 2 March 2016).

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Introduction

Within Iran’s neighborhood, Russia’s big consumer market is one of top priorities for Tehran to develop its economic and commercial ties. Reading economic history of Iran and Russia, one realizes the ebb and flow of bilateral trade performances. Recent deterioration of Russian relationship with some powerful western states and Turkey on Ukraine Crisis and Jet shootdown, has made Tehran and Moscow forge in a more diplomatically and economically cordial terms. As a sign of proof, the heads of states of Iran and Russia held a summit five times over a year ago meaning a friendly relationship in economic affairs. However, a key question is how to turn the current fluctuating cooperation into a strategic one (i.e. sustainable and continuous), when dealing with financial and commercial sectors? This paper will go into detail about opportunities and obstacles to Iran’s bilateral trade ties with Russia and conclude the argument with some recommendations for a robust relationship.

Current Status of Bilateral Economic Ties

Iran is Russia’s 60th export market and is ranked number 53 for Russian imports. Among Iran’s main export goods to Russia are fresh and dried fruit, fresh and canned vegetables, tomato sauce, date, salt and Sulphur, organic chemical goods, plastic goods, medicine, glass, carpet, automobile, goods making out of iron and cement, to name but a few. Iran, on the other hand, imports Russian goods including flat rolling products, wheat, wood, barley, iron, steel, feed grain, coke and semi-cock, coal, sunflower oil, hot rolling bars, newsprint paper, carbon electrode and products of the mixed rolling steels. The chart shows the volume of trade plus balance of trade between Iran and Russia during the past ten years.

Iran–Russia Trade Flows and Balance 2007–2015 (Value million \$)

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2Q 2016
Export	367	349	332	336	370	501	317	296	173	47
Import	863	1370	884	425	759	1631	688	639	517	538
Balance	-496	-1021	-552	-89	-389	-1130	-371	-343	-344	-491
Total trade	1230	1719	1216	761	1129	2132	1005	935	690	585

Source: IRICA

As the Western–led sanctions has been inflicting increasing toll on Russian economy, Tehran–Moscow newly cordial political relations pave the way for enhancing bilateral economic ties in various sectors. In that regard, successive Iranian governments have been paid their attention to non–oil exports strategy, included in the twenty–year Grand Vision Plan and the 6th Five–Year Development Plan (FY2016–FY2020). Of particular importance is the central role of the neighboring countries including Russia playing in the Iranian exporting grand strategy. What factors enhance the bilateral economic ties varies from geography to culture, to history, to market. Short Caspian Sea corridors, Iran’s overland transit route

to East and South Asia, highly fertile soil and good weather conditions in Iran, cultural and historical commonalities between Iran and some ethnic groups in southern Russia and lastly, Iranian rising market for Russian traders are among significant factors the Iranian–Russian economic ties need to take advantage.

Existing Obstacles to Bilateral Economic Ties

In macroeconomic terms, one of the obstacles to economic cooperation between the two states lies within banking sector. Despite some formal agreements, hindrances to financial transactions and credit line, to name but a few, still remain in place. Russian international banks keeping a low profile in Iran along with loose interbank connectivity result in limited bilateral economic ties. In addition, Russia's quality standard system is not compatible with that of Iran; thus, a strict and complicated procedure should be carried out for any Iranian goods entry into the Russian market. Problems related to insurance and credit lines for Iranian projects as well as lack of tariff preferences between the two states and high rate of customs tariff for Iranian exporting goods are among obstacles in the way of Iranian–Russian trade ties.

Shortages of road, sea and air corridors, lack of refrigerated containers for transportation of temperature sensitive cargo, total ban on Iranian vessels to docking at 35 harbors (out of 40 ones) in Port of Astrakhan, irregular schedule for RORO ships in the Caspian Sea and discriminatory practices against Iranian vessels and temperature sensitive cargo in particular, at the Russian harbors are among the challenges Iranian traders are facing in the Russia's market.

Unfortunately, the following factors, as yet, have hindered the Iranian businessmen success in Russia' market: the low diversity of exported merchandise to Russia, the low-quality and expensive Iranian products in some cases and the incapability of competing with other foreign products in Russia' market, inappropriate packaging of exported products, Iranian businessmen's shortcomings in proper marketing, communication and holding exhibitions as well as lack of full awareness and understanding of Russian market's needs and tastes.

Measures for Expanding Economic Cooperation

A series of measures is taken to improve economic relations between the two countries. These measures are as follows:

- Holding the first industry, trade and investment workshop between two countries in September 2014;
- Export Guarantee Fund of Iran (EGFI) and Export Insurance Agency of Russia (EXIAR) signed an agreement in-principle on November 30, 2014 in Tehran;
- Iranian minister of industry, mine and trade and Russian minister of economic development signed a cooperation agreement on November 30, 2014 in Tehran;
- Iran's Veterinary Organization and Russia's Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance signed an agreement in November, 2014;

- Holding 12th Iran–Russia Joint Commission meeting in November, 2015;
- Trade Promotion Organization and Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines signed an agreement of launching regular shipping lines in Caspian Sea on June 6, 2015;
- Zero or low tariff for products such as pistachio, fish, shrimp, cabbage and raisin;
- Issuing the export permit of dairy, livestock and aquatic products to Russia's market;
- An agreement on facilitating the issuing of visas was signed;
- Documents were signed to create green corridor between the two countries.

Suggested Strategies to Enhance the Trade Volume between the Two States

- Negotiation with Eurasian Union to reduce the customs tariff;
- Establishing the joint Iran–Russia bank for investment and export financial support;
- Codification of a comprehensive marketing plan and mass media advertising in the two countries to increase the businessmen and manufacturers' understanding of the potentials of the two countries;
- Strengthening the sea lanes, roads and air lines between the two countries to increase bilateral trade;
- Setting up a railway link between the two countries;
- Strengthening the legal infrastructure between the two countries;
- Establishment of Caspian Economic Cooperation Organization between the Caspian littoral states;
- Surpassing merchandise trade and moving towards using the whole economic cooperation methods;
- Holding conferences and seminars to introduce investment and export capabilities;
- Granting freight transportation and insurance subsidies to reduce the final cost of products exported from Iran to Russia.

Topic 11. Prospects for Cooperation of Iran and Russia with Third Partners and International Organizations (China, SCO, EAEU, Chinese “Silk Road Economic Belt”)

We are witnessing a shift in the modern world order: the centre of global political and economic activity gradually move away from the West and towards the East, to Asia. Regional powers and integration unions involving these powers are on the rise, and they have the capacity to form a pole of power on the international stage. Russia and Iran support the idea of a polycentric world and are more than interested in taking an active role in reformatting regional relations both in Central Eurasia and in Greater East Asia. Both countries seek to consolidate their positions in the new configuration of integration relations.

Forming Central Asian and Eurasian centres of influence opens up new possibilities for the two countries. Russia wants to become a core element of the large interregional Eurasian structure and strengthen its influence in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. It can use Iran’s status of a promising regional player that occupies a special geostrategic and geo-economic position linking the East and the West. The convergence of the geopolitical interests of the two states and the closeness of their positions on the issues of security and stability provides a basis not only for bilateral interaction, but also for interaction in other formats. It is in the economic interests of both countries to take part in regional projects, and doing so will also help take relations between the two countries to a qualitatively new level.

Closing the nuclear deal and lifting the international sanctions against Iran opens up promising opportunities for the country in terms of working with regional structures. Iran has demonstrated a strong interest in restoring contacts with the West, as well as great pragmatism with regard to stepping up its “Look to the East 2” policy.²⁴⁰ The country is trying to expand its economic ties and gain access to new markets. Political analysts in Iran describe the essence of the Hassan Rouhani administration’s foreign policy thus: “focusing on regionalism and expanding interactions with nations and states in the form of economic, political and security coalitions will provide Iran with opportunities to play its economic and political role in the region, prevent further threats, and increase Iran’s bargaining power in the relations with great powers.”²⁴¹

One of the priorities of the eastern vector of Russian foreign policy is to develop, expand and strengthen the institutional structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Iran has been an observer in the SCO since 2005 and has repeatedly

²⁴⁰ The foreign policy pursued by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) came to be called the “Look to the East” policy. The Hassan Rouhani administration’s policy of stepping up contacts with Asian countries during a time when the influence of the United States over relations with these countries has weakened, and the shift of the focus from oil exports to investment projects has been called the “Look to the East 2”.

²⁴¹ Barzegar K. Regionalism in Iran’s Foreign Policy. URL: <http://www.en.cmess.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=303>

stated its intention to become a full member of the organization. Back then, Iran saw the SCO as a structure for guaranteeing regional security that was capable of limiting the influence of the United States and strengthen the image of Iran on the international arena. The economic advantages were of secondary concern.

The SCO members have expressed an interest in Iran's participation in this structure. They believe that Iran's regional policy goals largely coincide with the organization's objectives, and the country's resource, economic, logistic and military potential is extremely promising.²⁴² However, its sharp anti-American stance, coupled with the international sanctions, kept the issue of full membership out of the discussion for a long time.²⁴³

Iran hopes to become an SCO member, despite it does not demonstrate its interest so actively as it was during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's time in office.

In addition to the desire to become one of the states that has a hand in deciding the fate of the Middle East region, Iran's interest in the SCO in recent years has been determined by new threats. Radical Islamism and terrorism are spreading to neighbouring countries and threaten to penetrate into Iran itself via its western and eastern borders. Realizing that this threat goes beyond national boundaries, Iran fears that these organizations could spread into the Caucasus and areas of Central Asia and Western China. In the SCO and its coordinated activities with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Iran sees a real chance to reduce the risk of destabilization in the region. The country's leadership is concerned about the spread of separatism, transnational crime, drug trafficking, illegal migration and gunrunning and hopes to use the possibilities offered by the SCO to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. In these respects, the interests of Iran largely coincide with those of Russia and other SCO members.²⁴⁴ There is a commonality in the approaches of Iran and the SCO in combatting the growing influence of non-regional actors. Iran's accession to the organization could increase its significance on a global level, thus bringing together the most influential countries in the region, namely, Russia, China, India and Iran. This will help optimize the balance of powers in the region and pave the way for the development of joint approaches to regional and global issues.

In the conditions of the expanding SCO and the appearance of new dialogue partners, the economic prospects for the organization grow too, especially in light of its stated intentions with regard to working with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt. It expands the potential for cooperation, strength-

²⁴² For an in-depth discussion of the mutual interests of Iran and SCO, see: Mamedova N.M. Iran and the SCO // The SCO and the Middle East (on the 10th Anniversary of the SCO). Collection of essays edited by M.R. Arunova. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2011, pp. 42–44; Mamedova N.M. Iran and the SCO // The Role and Place of Iran in the Region. Collection of essays edited by N.M. Mamedova and M. Imanipura. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2007, pp. 69–70

²⁴³ The Draft Regulations on the Procedures for Admitting New Members to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was approved at the SCO Summit in June 2010. The Regulations stated that countries under sanctions from the United Nations cannot be admitted into the SCO. Regulations on the Procedures for Admitting New Members to the Shanghai Cooperation // SCO and the Middle East, pp. 185–187.

²⁴⁴ Luzyanin, S.G., Sarfonova, E.I. The Prospects of Developing the SCO Strategy // The Prospects of Developing the SCO from the Russian Perspective. Collection of essays edited by Y.V. Morozova. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2016, pp. 73–80.

ens regional integration and gives a new impetus to development. Iran promotes the idea of coordinating SCO and Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) projects,²⁴⁵ and supports the initiative to develop an economic partnership among the SCO, the EAEU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The sharp fall in oil prices, coupled with the increasingly fierce competition for energy markets, means that a great deal of political coordination is required in terms of extracting and transporting oil and gas. Tackling these issues without input from Iran is unlikely to yield effective results. Coordinating policies with the largest consumers of Iranian oil (China and India), agreeing new oil supply routes, cooperation in hydrocarbon production and processing, connecting electricity grids and ensuring mutual electricity supply – these are all additional factors that draw Iran and the SCO together and open up the possibility of creating an SCO “Energy Club”.

Russia and Iran are aware of the correlation between security issues and the socioeconomic and cultural development of a country. An important area of the SCO’s activity is humanitarian cooperation, an area in which Iran shows great potential. If the country were to join the SCO, this would increase the possibility of initiating projects in education (both secular and religious education), the joint production of cultural works (films and television programmes), the reconstruction of historical monuments, scientific and technological cooperation and the development of tourism, which would help strengthen inter-civilizational dialogue. Iran has a number of soft power tools at its disposal – a common history and cultural traditions, as well as a linguistic affinity with the Central Asian states, as well as with Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Russia’s southern regions. If this is combined with Russian and Chinese cultural components, then it can be used to counter radical Islamist ideas in an effective way. Humanitarian contacts could compensate for difficulties that might arise in other areas of cooperation.

Right now, there are no serious obstacles for Iran to become a member of the SCO. At the same time, however, there are a number of issues that could cause the SCO member states to regard Iran with a certain amount of suspicion. The continuing confrontation with the United States, which still dominates the political discourse within the country, is one such issue. Conservative forces inside Iran are not happy with the nuclear deal and take a strong anti-western stance. They have retained their influence in a number of state institutions and could very well return to power following the elections in 2017. The development of the situation in Iran, which could lead to the country failing to fulfil the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which is not in the interests of the SCO; while the SCO is a union of non-western countries, it does not position itself against the West.

Another aspect that complicates the situation with regard to Iran’s accession to the SCO is its support of Islamic organizations in Tajikistan, which has caused impassioned protests from the authorities in that country and complicates Iran–Tajikistan relations. Meanwhile, the traditional ties between the two nations, the

²⁴⁵ The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is a regional organization founded in 1985 at the initiative of Iran. The ECO member states are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

history of political cooperation, could turn into an opportunity for Tajikistan to find methods for developing constructive interaction with national Islamic political forces that do not follow radical ideas. This creates momentum for resolving problems between the two countries.

It is clear that these factors, as well as China's concerns about Russia and Iran enhancing their political interaction within the SCO, were the reason why the issue of Iran's accession to the SCO was not resolved at the 2016 Summit in Tashkent. At the same time, Russia does not see any obstacles to Iran joining the SCO.²⁴⁶ Russia's Special Presidential Envoy to the SCO Bakhtier Khakimov noted that the members of the organization "do not have any objections [to Iran becoming a member of the SCO] in principle. There are, however, technical nuances with regard to launching the process."²⁴⁷ It is expected that the issue will be resolved once and for all at the next summit.

Doubts were expressed in Iran on the eve of the summit about the prospects of the country being admitted into the SCO as a permanent member, the argument being that it would be better to wait for an official invitation rather than force the issue.²⁴⁸ Fears were voiced in connection with the fact that membership of any international structure where decisions are made by consensus entails certain limits to the sovereignty of the member countries.²⁴⁹ It was noted that Iran will have to bring its national legislation in line with the SCO Charter and other documents.²⁵⁰ Given that this will be the first time since the Iranian Revolution that the country has been a full member of a multilateral international organization, the fact that certain provisions of the SCO Charter may not agree with the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran makes it a rather sensitive issue for many Iranians.

However, despite the different opinions within Iran on the need to join the SCO, the country's leadership has not given up on the idea, as it understands that full membership of the SCO means that it will have access to decision-making mechanisms within the system of international relations.

Iran is interested in establishing partner relations with the EAEU. And it is in the interests of Russia, the key player in this structure, to expand the borders of the EAEU space, which will also help propel links within the organization to a new level. Interaction with Iran will open up markets, as well as provide access to important transit routes, in the Middle East.

Iran hopes to get preferential tariffs so that it can expand the fledgling commercial partnership and, if possible, increase the share of products it trades with Russia. It is common knowledge that trade volume between the two countries is seriously hampered by high customs duties, complicated border control procedures and

²⁴⁶ URL: <https://rg.ru/2016/06/24/putin-prizval-priniat-iran-v-shos.html> (in Russian).

²⁴⁷ URL: <http://www.tass.ru/politika/3394519> (in Russian).

²⁴⁸ Beheshtipour H. Why Iran Shouldn't Rush to become a Member of the SCO.
URL: <http://www.khabaronline.ir/print/54452/weblog/beheshtipour?mo> (in Persian).

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ Pakparvar M. I.R. Iran and SCO after Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), Opportunities and Challenges // Report at the International Forum "On the Second Track. The Role of Civil Society and Public Diplomacy in the Further Development and Expansion of the SCO." Sochi, 19.04.2016.

the fact that variation of transport routes is limited. Given that a portion of the goods exported to Russia pass through EAEU countries, Iran has expressed a desire to participate in the Free Trade Zone (FTZ) project. Russia is interested in importing foodstuffs from Iran, which could partially replace Turkish imports. The May 2016 agreements on tariff concessions (on average up to 25 percent) and customs exemptions on certain groups of goods should stimulate trade relations between the two countries. An intergovernmental agreement on cooperation and mutual assistance in customs-related matters was also signed, as was a protocol on a simplified customs corridor. Since the provisions of these documents extend to all five EAEU countries, it is safe to assume that the first step towards cooperation with Iran has been taken.²⁵¹

Iran understands that the negative trade balance with Russia greatly complicates cooperation in the financial sector and hinders the development of relations between the two countries moving forward. The country's participation in EAEU projects creates an opportunity to build institutional financial relations and optimize cooperation mechanisms.

The Eurasian Economic Commission is holding consultations with Iran on the implementation of an FTZ. For the time being, the consultations are informal in nature, however, they are negotiating the groups of goods that are of an interest in terms of exports to both sides. The provisional agreement will be submitted to the heads of all the states for approval.²⁵² Iran is expected to be invited to join the EAEU before the end of 2016.

There is also promise in terms of carrying out joint logistics projects (creating Iranian–Russian–Armenian, or Iranian–Russian–Azerbaijani transport and warehousing companies) and developing contacts among small and medium-sized businesses, in particular agricultural and raw materials processing in neighbouring regions (the Astrakhan Region, the Volga Region, Dagestan and Armenia).²⁵³

When evaluating the prospects of partner relations with Iran as part of the EAEU it is necessary to bear in mind that, right now, the Iranian side is considering a limited format of participation only, at joining the organization at the lowest integration level possible. Deepening cooperation will depend on an assessment of the real benefits and risks based on the results of joint activities.²⁵⁴

As far as Russia is concerned, Iran is attractive to the EAEU not only in terms of developing trade links and attracting Iranian investments to a number of its southern regions. The idea of bringing the EAEU, the SCO, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the ASEAN together that was put forward by President Putin at the ASEAN–Russia Business Forum in May 2016 requires a new map of transport routes to be created.²⁵⁵ Not only that, it makes Iran more interesting as a country

²⁵¹ URL: <http://www.eurasnews.ru/iran>. 23.05.2016 (in Russian).

²⁵² URL: <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/nae/news/Pages/27-05-2016-10.aspx> (in Russian).

²⁵³ The Prospects for Iran–EAEU Relations: Challenges and Opportunities. Interview with Dr. F. Parand.
URL: <http://www.iras.ir/fa/doc/interview/936> (in Persian).

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51951> (in Russian).

with great transit potential. It opens up the possibility for creating multiple transport corridors with the EAEU, thus turning Iran into one of the main transport hubs in the macro–region.

In this regard, particular attention should be paid to completing the North–South Transport Corridor project, which will significantly shorten this route and reduce transit time and transportation costs from the Baltic Sea to the Persian Gulf and South Asia.²⁵⁶ The importance of this project lies in the fact that it is controlled at every stage by EAEU and SCO countries, and is the most economic route. At present, just the multimodal Trans–Caspian route and the western branch of the international transport corridor (ITC) that runs through Azerbaijan are put to work.²⁵⁷

The transit potential of the railway infrastructure of the Caspian region is greatly underutilized, although trade between Europe and the countries in the Persian Gulf and South Asia is growing steadily.²⁵⁸ The reason for this situation is the lack of a number of “connecting links” in the transport chain, the underdeveloped infrastructure in certain areas, inconsistent tariff policies, the difference of track widths and a multitude of other problems. A project has been completed recently to link the railways on the Azerbaijan–Iran border (which will set the ball rolling on the western branch of the ITC that runs along the Azerbaijani coast of the Caspian Sea and increase transit capacity to 25 million tonnes. The route could reduce freight transit via Turkey, including along the Bosphorus–Dardanelles. The port of Olya is being reconstructed and the problems of attracting additional freight (return loading) are being dealt with. According to the various estimates, Russia stands to gain \$2–5 million from the transport corridor.²⁵⁹

The “eastern” section of the Caspian project that runs through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and reaches Iran is also promising, as is the construction of the “eastern beam” from Saratov,²⁶⁰ which could connect the railways of Russia and Kazakhstan to China and shift a part of the freight flows from China to Western Europe to Russia.

For its part, Iran has demonstrated a strong interest in making full use of the ITC. Work has been stepped up on the Qazvin – Rasht (Anzali) – Astara section, and the Bafq – Zahedan section connecting the borders of Iran and Pakistan has been completed. Ports on the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf are being reconstructed. It is in the interests of all parties to complete the project as soon as possible, and not only because it will increase transit revenues for both Iran and Russia. The corridor will eventually play a key role in connecting the EAEU infrastructure with the southern (Iranian) branch of the Silk Road Economic Belt project and link Russia with the latitudinal portion of the East–West transport corridor.

²⁵⁶ The agreement on the establishment of the international transport corridor was signed by Russia, Iran and India in 2000.

²⁵⁷ Freight from Iran’s southern ports (in the Persian Gulf) is transported along the Trans–Caspian route to the northern ports of the Caspian and further by sea to Russian terminals. From there, freight is forwarded by land to St. Petersburg.

²⁵⁸ URL: <http://www.gudok.ru/transport/zd/?ID=882159> (in Russian).

²⁵⁹ Grozin A.V. The the North–South Transport Corridor as a Factor in the Integration of the Eurasian Space. URL: <http://www.materik.ru/problem/detail.php?ID=15111> (in Russian).

²⁶⁰ The railway line that runs along the eastern bank of the Caspian Sea connecting Zhanaozen (Kazakhstan) to Bereket (Turkmenistan) and Gorgan (Iran) was put into operation in late 2014.

A number of countries are interested in the North–South Transport Corridor project, but it is of particular significance to the rising Indian economy. India has been looking to gain a foothold in Central Asia via Iran. In May 2016, India and Iran signed an agreement on the development of Chabahar Port on the Gulf of Oman.²⁶¹

At the same time, a strategic tripartite agreement on the construction of the Chabahar – Zahedan (India) – Zaranj (Afghanistan) line was signed by Iran, Afghanistan and India.²⁶² The project will give India access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. The construction of a major industrial and transport hub in South–Eastern Iran will increase the opportunities for transporting freight through Iran. Chabahar is thus turning into a major transport hub. China and Japan have also expressed a willingness to invest in the development of the port (the second stage).²⁶³ Moreover, China declares the potential of the Iranian project building a map of the sea route in Southwest Asia and having already invested in the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Having turned Chabahar into a free trade zone, the Iranian authorities expect other countries to help develop it further.

Iran and India are discussing other projects, including the possible construction of a gas pipeline from Chabahar to Gujarat (India), the participation of India in the economic development of Afghanistan, and oil production in South Pars / North Dome Gas–Condensate Field (Farzad B). There is no doubt that Russia needs to monitor the situation and make efforts to expand cooperation between India and Iran with a view to tying India’s interest in the North–South project by ensuring the terms of delivery, as well as to identify other opportunities for cooperation.

Trilateral expert consultations on security, countering non–traditional threats, Afghanistan and non–proliferation have already begun,²⁶⁴ as well as the work of the tripartite commission on customs issues. Having developed a system of trilateral relations, and speaking as one at regional organizations, Russia, India and Iran can counterbalance China’s position on a number of questions. Cooperation in swap deliveries of gas and LNG, peaceful nuclear energy, petrochemicals, medicine and pharmaceuticals, high technologies and education could be promising as well.

Given the strategic partner relations between Iran and China, Iran’s interest in the “One Belt, One Road” project, which will significantly increase the country’s transit potential, has opened up the prospects for Russia to cooperate with these countries both within the framework of regional institutions, as well as in a trilateral format, to develop an economic and geopolitical strategy for the region. Their political contacts, the foundation for which was laid during negotiations on the nuclear programme, could develop on the basis of converging political interests within the framework of discussions on the future world order, the Middle

²⁶¹ The agreements stipulate the construction of two terminals and five multimodal docks. India has allocated a total of \$500 million for the development of the port, of which \$150 million is in the form of a line of credit with the Export Import Bank of India. The first phase of the port is expected to be commissioned by the end of the Iranian year (March 2017).

²⁶² URL: <http://www.parstoday.com/ru/news/iran-i27145> (in Russian).

²⁶³ URL: <http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/03/08/1086284> (in Persian).

²⁶⁴ URL: <http://www.ir.sputniknews.com/iran/20151209/1014434.html> (in Persian).

Eastern question, the confrontation of the “three evil forces” and security in Asia. The three countries have also shown an interest in military cooperation. Russia could use the interests of Iran to balance China’s role in the region.

Clearly, joint cooperation on the part of the SCO and the Silk Road Economic Belt in logistics, investment, and oil and gas will increase the level of economic cooperation between the two entities and contribute to the movement of capital, goods and services over large areas. In addition to the construction and modernization of railways and motorways in Russia, Iran and the Caspian, cooperation in setting up FTZs, simplifying customs regulation, improving the legislative framework of foreign trade activity, and carrying out financial transactions with the help of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, of which all three countries are co-founders, could prove to be very useful for all three states. They could also work together to develop a unified energy system for the region.

Space technology, nanotechnologies, nuclear energy and medicine are also areas where cooperation could be increased. Creating a mechanism of expert consultations will help to expand the zone of interaction.

It should be noted that the prospects for the development of cultural and humanitarian cooperation among three countries that represent three global civilizations. Establishing a three-way dialogue and aligning cultural interaction among the three countries will build confidence, promote tolerance and improve the image of all the states involved.

Looking at the possibilities offered by trilateral formats, it must be taken into account that attempts to strengthen the Russia–Iran–India triangle will discontent China, which has its issues in relations with India and is conducting its own policy with regard to Eurasia. Pakistan could also express concern about Iran and Russia deepening relations with India. But these problems could be counterbalanced by multilateral work in regional organizations.

Russia–Iran cooperation in various formats in the region will help the two sides realize their political goals and their economic interests. It will also strengthen their positions in international structures, increase trust and take bilateral relations to a qualitatively new level. What is more, these relations will depend less on relations with other countries; they will develop in a positive way and the foundation of the strategic partnership between the two countries will be secured.

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Cooperation among Iran, Russia and China in the international politics can be regarded as an emerging process. The interactions of the three countries in resolving Iran's nuclear issue, maintaining the existing political system in Syria, cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework, joint counter-terrorism campaigns and economic interactions are all clear-cut signs of this cooperation. However, despite its importance, the evolving process has not been thoroughly studied. In other words, to what extent this cooperation is institutionalized and what areas it covers has not been received meticulous attention. This article sets to address the interactions among Iran, Russia and China, recently known as an 'emerging strategic triangle' in the international politics. In this regard, interactions, cooperation and the rivalries of Tehran-Moscow-Beijing are discussed in three levels of analysis: global, regional and domestic; hence understanding the magnitude of cooperation from strategic perspective.

Global Level of Analysis

What makes Iran, Russia and China have common interests is their revisionary approach to the existing international order. All three states have defined and stressed on multipolarism as one of their strategic priorities; however, it is key to note that each state has unique revisionary approach. Iran and Russia can be nearly called revolutionary governments while China also seeks reconsideration and revision in international order but with a different reformist agenda. It prioritizes the reforming of the existing order using the mechanisms within the system. These differences on how these three states seek to reappraise the international order have made each of them select a different approach to push the international order to multipolarism.

Another factor at this level of analysis which affects the strategic interactions of the countries with each other is the type of their relationship with the United States. In other words, each of the three has a specific definition of the United States in their foreign policy. On other hand, the United States as the most important player in the existing international order has selected different attitudes towards the three revisionist states. In Russia's foreign policy, the United States is defined as a strategic competitor and to some extent a threat to its security. This has led to a specific pattern of competition and cooperation between themselves; simultaneously use containment and engagement strategies towards each other. On the other hand, the pattern of the interactions between the United States and China can be called strategic cooperation and competition, due to the fact that the basis for cooperation between the two states is very vast and their strategic competition has diverse manifestations.

The pattern of interaction between the United States and Iran is different from those of Russia and China. Not only are there no diplomatic relations between the two states, but the United States tries to contain Iran's freedom of action in the international politics. On the other hand, Iran can be considered as the most important challenge against the regional policies of the United States in the West Asia.

In addition to the United States, the attitude of the three states towards the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as the most important institutional element of

the existing international order is significantly different. China and Russia as two permanent members of the UNSC view it as one of the key mechanisms of role playing in the international politics. In other words, from the perspective of China and Russia, the UNSC is one of the key mechanisms of multipolarism in the international system and one of the major obstacles against the unilateral tendencies of the United States. However, Iran, repeatedly subject to the sanction regimes of the UNSC since the early years of the 1980s, has defined the UN organ as an unfair, tyrannical and even unlawful mechanism.

All in all, China, Russia and Iran seek to revise the existing international politics and view multipolarism as one of the priorities of their foreign policy even though a revisionist agenda of each of them in dealing with the United States as well as the institutional dimensions of the existing international order is distinct and bears poor similarities.

Regional Level of Analysis

China and Russia are both simultaneously considered as regional and global powers. That is to say in addition to their key role in their regions, they are also vital actors in the world politics. However, Iran is a regional power and its scope of foreign policy is limited to its neighbors and the Middle East. In the regional level of analysis, the first and the most important matter in explaining the Iran–Russia–China strategic triangle is recognizing the different priorities of regions in their foreign policy and the differences in their strategic concerns. East Asia, Near Abroad, and the Middle East are respectively considered as the major priorities in the regional policies of China, Russia and Iran. In other words, it proves regions the trios invest in appear strikingly different.

In addition, their strategic concerns differ considerably. The most important strategic concern of Beijing is to safeguard its interests in the South China Sea, while Russia's key concern is deemed to preserve its interests in the Near Abroad, and Ukraine in particular. Iran's strategic concern is different with the other two states; main priority for Tehran is to retain its favorable balance of power in the Middle East.

Despite differences in foreign policy priorities, the regional policies of Iran, Russia and China overlap in some subsystems, and might oppose somewhere else. Central Asia subsystem gains the most significant common priorities and concerns of the trios – a region where the three powers not only have common borders but also have common history and hence, it matters to the foreign policy of Iran, Russia and China. This region is part of the Russian near abroad, northwest of China's security environment and northeast of Iran's security environment. In recent centuries, Russia has been the dominant player in this region and is still the most important security provider and one of the key players in geo-economy of Central Asia. However, after the Soviet collapse, Iran has been trying to expand its economic and cultural ties with the Central Asian newly independent states and has provided them with access routes to high seas. In recent years, a rising China has quickly become the dominant player in the Central Asia's geo-economy and has made successful efforts through SCO for achieving a regional integration.

However, turning Central Asia into the common point of regional policies of Tehran, Moscow and Beijing does not mean their interests in Central Asia have maximum overlap. Growing influence of China in the Central Asian states' geo-economy might lead to decline of the Iranian and Russian regional share and status in the economies of Central Asia. In addition, by linking the Central Asia energy and transport routes to those of China, they have found an alternative for Iranian and Russian corridors, as traditional options for access routes to the world markets. Chinese routes have reduced the transit importance of Iran and Russia for the landlocked Central Asia and on the other hand, have faced Tehran and Moscow with new rivals (i.e. the newly independent republics) in China's energy market. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an embodiment of emerging integration in Central Asia is another issue where the interests and approaches of Iran, Russia and China meet roughly frostily. It is obvious that there are important disparities between the Russian and Chinese agendas in advancing the organization – differences rooted in the mode of production and power projection of both states. The Chinese mode of production and power projection in East Asia has geo-economic elements, while Russia has long been a geopolitical power in the region.

But the larger issue which showcases the complexity of interactions between Iran, Russia and China in Central Asia is the long, indecisive and indeterminate process of Iran's membership in the SCO. Despite great efforts of Iran for joining the club in the past decade, no change has occurred yet in its membership status. It is obvious that while China and Russia have decisive roles in this intergovernmental body, lack of political will has hindered Iran's full membership in the SCO. Iran's membership was postponed for a while due to the United Nations restrictive measure against Tehran; however, no change has been occurred yet to Iran's membership despite sanction removals in 2015. Complexity of Tehran membership in the SCO is of great importance in analysis of Iran–Russia–China triangle. This long process shows that joint cooperation and coordination, even in the area where the trios have overlapping security environment, is not institutionalized. In other words, China and Russia have been reluctant to engage Iran in the economic and security environment of Central Asia in recent years.

In addition to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, two major regional integration projects recently presented by China and Russia known as “One road, One belt” (OBOR) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) respectively, bear out both states pursue their own unique priorities in the region and beyond. Two important questions can be raised in this area: first, what is the relationship between these initiatives and the SCO? Second, are these initiatives a sign of the SCO failure in the process of Eurasian integration? These initiatives proposed by two components of the strategic triangle in Central Asia on the one hand and Iran's continued emphasis on the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) on the other hand, prove each of the trios pursues its own specific integration agenda in Central Asia. So far, these agendas have not been much harmonized. Besides, the competition among Iranian, Russian and Chinese agendas and the new projects of Russia and China in particular should not be overlooked.

Domestic Level of Analysis

Iranian, Russian and Chinese political systems differ dramatically and pursue different priorities. Great disparities among political systems of the trios reduce their identity commonalities to the minimum level. In other words, value consistency between the three states is negligible and they have to cooperate only on common economic interests. In addition, this historical experience plays a negative role in the Iranian–Russian–Chinese relations. Cooperation between China and Russia has grown far more than the cooperation between Iran and each of the other two states or the trilateral cooperation.

Within the domestic level, the main negative factor affecting interactions of members of the strategic triangle is the weakness of social foundations shaping the cooperation of the trios with one another. Public opinion as well as some key elites in China and Russia do not favor strategic partnership with Iran. Likewise, public opinion in Iran does not have a positive perspective to strategic collaboration with Russia and somewhat with China. Weak social infrastructures have limited the interactions of the trios to mere governmental level.

Another point that should be emphasized in the national level of analysis is the weakness in Iranian, Russia and Chinese bureaucracies in shaping and advancing the tripartite cooperation. The recent military cooperation between Iran and Russia in Iranian Nojeh Airbase clearly demonstrated the bureaucratic weakness. In regional initiatives such as OBOR and EEU, in spite of the overlapping interests, the trios have not succeeded yet to activate mechanisms for promoting tripartite interests.

Conclusion

The common interests of Iran, China and Russia in the international transitional order are increasing. Promoting multipolarism, stability and security in the Middle East, Central Asia and Afghanistan, fighting against terrorism, developing regional integration in Eurasia and military cooperation are among the common interests one could enumerate. Nevertheless, despite the growing common interests, no mechanisms have been defined for tripartite cooperation among Tehran, Moscow and Beijing yet. Although they form bilateral partnerships in light of crises, namely the Iranian nuclear crisis or the Syrian civil war, cooperation is indeed obligatory and temporary in general.

The strategic triangle of Iran, China and Russia has not been institutionalized yet. Factors such as weakness of the strategic bureaucracies in the three states, their conflicting priorities, asymmetry in power and their national priorities, unequal value and their different relations with the West are the most important reasons that prove the triangle has not been institutionalized yet. Iran's long process of full membership in the SCO can be seen as the most important indicator showing this partnership is not institutionalized. The unclear future of the membership can also be a sign for vague future of the strategic triangle. All in all, the Iranian, Russian and Chinese strategic triangle might affect more of external developments rather than a common well-defined strategy.

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Russian International Affairs Council

Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is a non–profit international relations think–tank on a mission to provide policy recommendations for all of the Russian organizations involved in external affairs.

RIAC engages experts, statesmen and entrepreneurs in public discussions with an end to increase the efficiency of Russian foreign policy.

Along with research and analysis, the Russian Council is involved in educational activities to create a solid network of young global affairs and diplomacy experts. RIAC is a player on the second–track and public diplomacy arena, contributing the Russian view to international debate on the pending issues of global development.

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The Institute for Iran–Eurasia Studies, commonly known as IRAS, founded in 2004, is an independent, non–profit, non–governmental think tank and publisher based in Tehran whose mission is to analyze and promote the understanding of major issues and current affairs of Eurasia and South Caucasus.

The mission of IRAS is to advance an unbiased and realistic understanding of Iranian interests in the Eurasia and South Caucasus, promote the policies that secure them and strengthen the regional cooperation between Iran and neighboring states.

IRAS research is structured around eight topics: defense and security, energy and environment, extremism and terrorism, regional cooperation, peace and conflict, politics and elections, society and culture, and trade and economics, which comprises regional programs on Central Asia, South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, China and Russia.

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