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Russia and Iran – a strategic alliance or something more?

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Dr Ghoncheh Tazmini is a Visiting Fellow at the Middle East Centre at LSE. She is currently researching Iranian-Russian alignment in the Middle East. Her paper *Russian-Iranian Alignment. An Eternal Marriage of (in) Convenience* will be published later in the year.

Russia and Iran have a long history, but is their current alliance based on pragmatism or ideology? **Ghoncheh Tazmini's** research suggests that more lies behind their partnership than economic or political gain.

In recent years, scholarship on Russian-Iranian relations has sprawled like an amoeba, stretching in various directions in response to diverse stimuli. Moscow's expanding footprint in the Middle East has generated renewed interest in unpacking the paradox of Russo-Iranian relations.

There are questions over the nature and the durability of this strategic partnership. Will the Russians abandon the Iranians if there was greater cooperation between Moscow and Washington? Is the Kremlin concerned about US-Iranian rapprochement and the implications of sanctions being eased or lifted (ie, would Iran privilege Western European firms and companies over Russian)?

There are also questions over Russian-Iranian geopolitical aspirations. Are Russia and Iran revisionist, anti-hegemonic states united in a quest to undermine the international system? Is there a Moscow-Tehran alliance slowly developing with the goal of dominating the Middle East as the US slowly scales back in the region? What role will Russia and Iran play in post-conflict Syria where the two states have maintained an uncomfortable partnership in support of the Bashar al-Assad government. Will they clash or cooperate? How does this partnership manifest in other conflict theatres such as Iraq or in Yemen?



Are Russia and Iran revisionist states united in a quest to undermine the international system? ”

Bilateral relations require careful academic analysis

These questions have generated a perpetual production line of literature and conference panels deliberating over the contours of Russo-Iranian cooperation. At the Middle East Centre, the research I am conducting draws attention to the importance of using the right terminology in describing bilateral relations. Branded as everything from a “random partnership”, to a “circumstantial alliance”, to an “oscillating relationship”, analysts have come up with some rather creative labels to frame bilateral relations.

The term “alliance”, I argue, is thrown around rather too loosely. A more accurate descriptor of the nature of Russian-Iranian engagement is “alignment”, a category that is closer in line with the non-military nature of the partnership. “Alignment” also makes room for the nuances of the partnership, which has been fraught with inconsistencies and friction.

What lies behind a Russian-Iranian alliance?

While the Kremlin has acted as a bulwark against Iran’s political and economic isolation, it has also fuelled speculation that Iran is a provisional counterweight or a bargaining chip. According to this narrative, the degree of expansion or contraction in Russo-Iranian cooperation depends on whether relations between the US and Russia are amicable or hostile at the time. This perspective explains why one Iran-based analyst argued that Russia **“runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds”** in its dealings with Iran.

Resentment towards Russia resurfaced in early April 2020, when a spokesman for the Iranian parliamentary presiding body, Behrouz Nemati, inveighed that Russia had not provided medical assistance to Iran in the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 virus. He lamented that the crisis revealed the Kremlin’s deep-seated Western orientation when it sent a cargo plane of medical equipment to the US rather than to what he called Russia’s **“tactical partner”**.



Russia, in particular, challenges the US-led Atlanticist ideological and power systems, and in this pursuit, Iran is a critical partner. 

Russian-Iranian relations may run deeper

Iran's former ambassador to Russia, Mehdi Sanai, would disagree. The former longstanding ex-ambassador argues that Moscow-Tehran relations are far deeper and far more extensive than many analysts have yet caught on. He argues that relations are distinctly "**strategic**" and mutually beneficial. Considering the longevity and consistency of the partnership, Russia has been far more of a friend than a foe.

Willing to work with Iran, Russia has proven to be an important supplier of sophisticated weapon systems, military equipment and technology. It may have dragged its feet in fulfilling contracts it had signed with the Iranians in the past (construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, and delays in the delivery of the powerful S-300 missiles to Iran). However, as an Iranian official put it, while Russia did not deliver on time, it did deliver in the end.

In fact, Russia has delivered on many fronts, despite diverging or conflicting interests. The research I am carrying out explores deeper lines of convergence. By casting a wider analytical net, I identify a fundamental connective tissue that binds Moscow and Tehran. I argue that Russia and Iran share a similar geopolitical worldview that is shaped by cultural-civilisational peculiarities, and a similar discursive genealogy in relation to the West.

Russia, in particular, challenges the US-led Atlanticist ideological and power systems, and in this pursuit, Iran is a critical partner. Both states oppose the idea of a single state or constellation of states (an order) as being able to impose normative values and power structures as universal. Instead, Moscow and Tehran subscribe to a more pluralistic vision of the international order, favouring sovereign internationalism over liberal interventionism.

Thus, while Moscow's mercurial manoeuvrings have made it a challenge to decipher the nature of Russian-Iranian relations, my research substantiates the case that Moscow-Tehran alignment is firmly anchored within a broader assemblage of shared principles and priorities. Considering Iran's regional entanglements, and Moscow's expanding footprint in various theatres, the US and rivaling states will have to consider the uncomfortable reality that Russian-Iranian alignment is likely to be an enduring feature of the Middle Eastern political landscape. ■

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