

Dynamics of Russo–Iranian collaboration in Syria and its impact on their wider relationship

19 April 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian-Iranian collaboration is borne largely out of narrow convenience, shared interests in limited theatres, and a broader coalition to oppose the United States' power in the Middle East. Although cooperation in Syria – on political, diplomatic and military fronts – is the current norm of the relationship; it does not define dynamics of the relationship. Russia and Iran have different roles and strategic ambitions in future. While Internal and external factors in each countries will define their overall bilateral relations: the economic, diplomatic and military cooperation between both countries will continue in the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War has been raging for more than half a decade, and has attracted the interventions of numerous external actors from across the globe. Whether interested in promoting peace or ensuring that their preferred faction increases influence, these external actors are as important to delineating the longevity and prospects of the conflict as the internal Syrian militias themselves.

As such, this paper seeks to understand the relationship between two critical outside powers with involvement in Syria, their objectives and the strategic importance of their goals, and the extent to which their current collaboration is a product of temporarily aligned interests in the Syrian conflict or the sharing of a wider global worldview. Namely, these nations are the Russian Federation (Russia) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran). Both of these countries have thrown their diplomatic heft and resources behind the forces of former Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, but for slightly differing purposes. This paper will assess the utility and durability of the current tactical alignment in Syria, and examine the wider relationship between Russia and Iran to predict how it will evolve over the coming years.

The methodology of this paper has largely been a qualitative study of secondary sources from reputable international affairs journals and news articles, although the authors are indebted to our correspondents and Middle East analysts, especially Ali Afshari and Mahan Abedin for their contributions.

THIS PAPER WILL ASSESS THE UTILITY AND DURABILITY OF THE CURRENT TACTICAL ALIGNMENT IN SYRIA, AND EXAMINE THE WIDER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA AND IRAN TO PREDICT HOW IT WILL EVOLVE OVER THE COMING YEARS.

HISTORY OF RUSSO-IRANIAN RELATIONS

To understand the foundations of the contemporary alliance it is initially important to situate it in the context of the historically turbulent relationship between Iran and Russia. From 1825-1828 the Russian Empire and Persia were at war over territories encompassing Persian Armenia. Following defeat, Persia was forced into signing the Treaty of Turkmenchay, ceding parts of modern day Armenia and Azerbaijan to the Russian Empire (1828). In 1907, British pressure engineered the Anglo-Russian Entente, an externally-imposed agreement which divided Iran into three enclaves comprising a Russian-controlled north, a British-administered south and a neutral central portion of the country (Ziring, 1981). In the following years, several acts of Russian oppression, such as the shelling of the Persian National Assembly and the Goharshad Mosque in 1911, fomented widespread dissent against Russian imperialism across the nation. The repression was briefly relieved by the October Revolution and Russia's temporary refocus on internal affairs, but following the end of the Second World War the Red Army occupying Iran refused to leave, only bowing to American diplomatic pressure in 1947 (Milani, 2016).

Though the 1979 Iranian Revolution (which toppled the pro-American Shah) turned Tehran slightly towards Moscow as the natural superpower surrogate to the US, this did not undo the previous centuries of mistrust. During the Cold War, Soviet Troops occupied Afghanistan's Western border, and from 1980-1988 supplied weapons to Iraq for use against Iran (Katz, 2002: 69). Simultaneously, Iran harshly criticised the Russian invasion of Afghanistan.

Despite this, Iran saw the United States as the greater threat, and in 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini wrote a letter to Gorbachev warning of the collapse of the Soviet Union and pledging Iranian friendship (Milani, 2016). Demonstratively, Iran elected not to support Chechen rebels in their fight against Russia in the mid-90s, even as it trained and equipped similar Islamist movements elsewhere (Ruff, 2016). Conversely, following the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has used Iran as a form of leverage in its political dealings with the USA (Kozhanev, 2015: 4-5). As recently as 2006, Russia supported anti-nuclear sanctions against Iran through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1696 (NTI, 2010).

Demonstrably, past decades and centuries characterise the Russian-Iranian relationship as a series of conflicts, competition and divergent interests. Nonetheless, contemporary rapprochement has seen a rejuvenation of diplomacy and a convergence of interests. Despite an atmosphere of limited trust and power politics, many have commented on the presence of a coherent alliance between Russia and Iran in Syria and the wider Eurasian region. In Russia, the relationship has been described as a 'watchful partnership', and evaluated as a form of strategic friendship (Geranmayeh et al, 2016: 11). In more practical terms, Parker phrases it as a 'wary engagement', where Moscow has deliberately engaged in a limited partnership (2016: 8). Up for debate, however, is the durability of this form of relationship in the Syrian context. While cooperation has occurred in conflict, a number of variables forecast both divergences and convergences between Iran and Russia should the conflict result in a political solution.

IRAN & RUSSIA: BEDFELLOWS IN SYRIA

Much has been made in contemporary journalism of the Russian support given to President Assad in the Syrian Civil War. It is also widely known that Tehran has operatives and high-ranking officials in Syria, providing advice and training to Assad's forces. These converging operations have led to some limited military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, demonstrating the degree to which they support the other's activities. Resultantly, it is a logical conclusion that Iran and Russia share objectives in the Syrian conflict, as both wish to see Assad's regime prevail and retain dominance across the country. However, this assessment is both correct and superficial. Indeed, Russia and Iran have more important reasons for cooperating in Syria and also several differences in their reasoning for seeking Assad's survival. This section outlines Russian and Iranian intentions with regards to Syria, as well as detailing the extent of their collaboration in the conflict.

The convergence of Russian and Iranian interests in Syria has materialised in the form of a military alliance with the Assad regime against the two pronged threat of the Free Syrian Army and Islamic State. Throughout the conflict in Syria, Iran has become a key customer to the Russian arms trade. Iran has purchased weapons systems including the S-300 air defence system, and is considering the purchases of the more advanced S-400 systems, T-90 tanks and Su-30 fighter aircraft (Trenin, 2016). More broadly, Russia and Iran have cooperated on military strategy and intelligence sharing in Syria (Business Insider, 2016). Specifically, Iran has permitted Russia to use its Hamadan Airbase from which to launch airstrikes against targets in Syria (Reuters, 2016).

However, it is difficult to identify sophisticated military integration, beyond that of resource sharing and combat support services. Indeed, in the absence of Russian ground troops, there is a limited extent to which Iran and Russia can combine military forces, while the slightly divergent tactical activities of either side would also preclude extensive tactical cooperation. It is therefore fairly accurate to characterise Iranian and Russian operations in Syria as two independent movements towards a common objective. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly some degree of military intelligence sharing through the Syrian conduit which allows the two nations to coordinate offensives and dispositions and enables

TACTICAL COLLABORATION

Russia to avoid targeting Iranian and Syrian allies on the ground.

Other than both sharing an interest in Assad retaining power, Russia and Iran are united in their opposition to regime change in the Middle East. In Iran, this has a legal and constitutional basis, with the Iranian constitution making clear its opposition to foreign intrusion, penned in direct response to the political engineering of the US in the Middle East prior to 1979. Such sentiment has likely stemmed from US involvement in the 1953 coup d'état in Iran and subsequent machinating on behalf of the USA's regional friend, Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Russia has expressed a suspicious attitude towards the Western policy of 'Responsibility to Protect', reflecting Russia's traditional understanding of state sovereignty (Baranovsky et al, 2016: 49). Indeed, there has been strong opposition to the removal of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the uncertain consequences of such action. Likewise, both Iran and Russia are against growing US hegemony in the Middle East, and the Russian and Iranian support for the maintenance of the Assad regime in Syria echoes this sentiment.

However, despite this shared distaste for American influence in the region, there are crucial differences between how Russia and Iran are approaching the conflict, and they each have slightly divergent reasons for supporting President Assad's regime. Perhaps Iran is most wedded to an Assad future, as Tehran wishes to maintain a friendly Shiite regime which will allow, if not actively enable, the flow of money and materiel from Iran to Hizb'ullah in Lebanon. Influence in Syria and Lebanon gives Iran a regional base to counter Israel and Saudi Arabia to the south, and an opportunity to combat Sunni terrorism. Iran's current projections of influence and military support operations would be unlikely to remain as effective under any realistic post-conflict settlement where Assad does not hold the large majority of power.

Separately, Russia's interests in Assad's regime are simply as a means to the end of increasing Russian influence in the region and maintaining a physical presence on the Mediterranean coast. While these interests could potentially be filled by any pro-Russian post-Civil War government, Assad increased his value to Russia in October 2016 by offering Moscow the Khmeimem airbase as a permanent footprint in Syria (Filipov & Roth, 2016). Additionally, Assad is strongly opposed to US and Western influences in the governance of Syria and the wider Middle East, making him an ideal prospect around which to build Syria's future. On the other hand,

RATIONALE FOR COOPERATION IN THE SYRIAN THEATRE

Assad has been lax on the arrests of Chechen terrorists and has redistributed Russian weapons to groups beyond their control, such as Hizb'ullah, demonstrating the precarious nature of his friendship. It is therefore not inconceivable, but extremely unlikely, that Russia would relinquish their support for Assad as a major bargaining chip in the final negotiations.

Indeed, one of Russia's primary objectives in Syria remains unrelated to Assad's future or even the outcome of the Syrian conflict itself. It is simply to increase the leverage that Russia has on the international stage as a military, economic and diplomatic power. Indeed, some have argued that the Russian intervention in Syria has less to do with real interests to be gained in the Middle East, and is better explained as a gambit to display Russia's military strength and increase Russian claims to global superpower status. This goal has been a mainstay of Russian foreign and military policy over the past decade. From the invasion of and subsequent withdrawal from Georgia to the annexing of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine, Russia's military has primarily been a tool to project Russian influence, rather than achieve military objectives.

HOW IRAN VIEWS THE RELATIONSHIP

Primarily, there are mixed feelings about Russia among both the political elite in Tehran and the Iranian public. Public attitudes to Moscow are largely positive following a decade of Russian cooperation and support, however a hangover of ill feeling and resentment from the 18th and 19th century campaigns and territorial loss mars this goodwill with grievance among a small subsection of Iranian public opinion. Nevertheless, most Iranians recognise the extent to which their military and economic standards depend upon Russian support and sales, and the vast majority of public opinion supports closer Russian ties. To maintain public goodwill, Russia operates two public radio stations in Farsi language; Radio Moscow and Sputnik Persian. While these stations undertake the same mission of misdirection and exaggeration as English-language RT, Russian propaganda in Iran is overwhelmingly inoffensive to the audience, as it complements Iranian political views and public lines so closely. To this end, much of its output is presenting a united front of an anti-US coalition of which Russia considers itself head agitator.

On the whole, Iranian political elites are more than comfortable to symbolically join this cabal, even if they resent the status of junior partner. The Iranian political constitution largely forbids formal alliances, particularly with non-Islamic countries, and so Iran relies on gestures of goodwill and relevant political, economic and military ties to bind itself to useful partners. This was exposed by the controversy over Russian use of the Hamadan airbase to launch strikes on Syria, which some in government and political commentary felt contravened the constitutional clause forbidding the compromise of Iranian territory or sovereignty by a foreign power. The fallout from this faux pas has not been monumental, but it has raised questions over the extent to which Russian military requirements are able to take precedence above Iranian integrity, with a number of Iranian opposition calling it a national humiliation.

Nevertheless, the Iranian political establishment is keen to maintain, and possibly deepen, ties with Russia, particularly in the realm of military and security capabilities. Of course, being excluded from the bulk of the global arms production sector, Iran imports the majority of its technology from Russia. This is becoming ever more critical as forces which have relied on

platforms from pre-1979 American deals are struggling to maintain combat effectiveness. Simultaneously, there are strong indications that Russia will be the next major influencer, if not globally then certainly in the Middle East, as Trump's America withdraws from its onshore protectionist positions and generally declines as a military superpower. With this in mind, Iran is well-placed to become a major partner to the next global hegemon, albeit in a junior role.

IRANIAN WORRIES IN SYRIA

Certainly, Iran is extremely cognizant of their 'junior partner' position already, and many Iranian politicians share the concern that Russian diplomatic heft may subsume their own bargaining positions. With a permanent place on the United Nations Security Council and intense involvement in the crisis to date, it is unfeasible that any diplomatic track towards a resolution would operate without the benevolent interference of Russia and, as noted, Moscow has slightly divergent hopes for a settlement than does Tehran.

Indeed, the marginalisation of Iran has already been witnessed in the largely Russian and Turkish-orchestrated ceasefire deal of 30 December 2016. While Tehran was no doubt consulted by the Russian side of this negotiation effort, the Russians have little ability or inclination to police the Iranian adherence to the agreement. Already there are indications that Iranian advisors have fomented the ceasefire's unravelling in Idlib province, suggesting that they never intended to halt operations where they believe they have the upper hand.

Perhaps this disobedience is a result of Iran's distrust of Russia's relationship with Turkey. Already Turkey is the biggest threat to Assad's forces, with troops and armaments on the ground. This makes them far more dangerous than Western advisors or airstrikes as they have the capability to gain and hold territory. Above all, Iran needs Assad to retain Damascus and its surrounding territories to increase his claim to governmental legitimacy over a territorially complete Syria.

Iran also fears Russia's diplomatic power given the differences between how the two countries see Syria. While both have stated that they wish Syria to retain its territorial integrity, Russia has made noises about a possible federal Syria solution. This would be unacceptable to Tehran as they would see it as the beginning of greater boundary upheaval across the region. Simultaneously, Russia views its interests in the region through a realist,

state-to-state lens, meaning that their only concern is who represents the nation in Damascus. Iran is very much more focused on Syria as an ethno-religious entity, aiming to see greater power to Shi'ite communities across the nation as well as a sympathetic regime in Damascus. It is seeking to 'win the peace' by creating a stable, Shia-dominated society throughout Syria. As such, Tehran has a very cynical view of the extent to which Russia will represent its interests at any negotiation table.

HOW RUSSIA VIEWS THE RELATIONSHIP

Overall, Russia has largely positive views of Iran and Iranian policy. Russian foreign policy tsars recognise that Iran is a key actor in the global opposition to US hegemony, and that the two nations share similar pariah statuses from the West in terms of experiencing economic and technological sanctions. The shared history of conflict also increases diplomatic ties, along with their shared security interests in the Caucasus and Caspian sea regions. However, Iran does not share the same status of exceptionalism in Russian calculations that it can be argued that Russia holds in Iranian policy-making.

In terms of the cooperative relationship in Syria, it has already been established that Russia wants to become a global player in the Middle East. A Russia-friendly Syria, Iran and Hizb'ullah would greatly increase Russia's claim to challenge the US for outsider dominance in the Middle East and would give Moscow greater leverage on the international stage. To achieve these ends, a strategy of prudent realpolitik is being followed, best emphasised by the plethora of relationships Russia has developed in the Middle East alongside that of Iran. In particular, Russia has established relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel, two of Iran's rivals in the region. As such, Syria fits into part of the wider Russian Middle Eastern strategy, where a close relationship with Iran must be balanced with that of others. It is this conception of Iran as one of a number of regional partners which characterises the Russian view of its relationship with the Islamic Republic.

Nevertheless, Russia is wary of Iran's ability to influence and mobilise powerful actors on the ground across much of the region. Russia is aware that its strategic foothold in Syria remains, and will remain, dependent upon the acquiescence of key stakeholders and popular support in the country's political and civil establishments. Through historical and current financial and military support, Iran has sufficient grassroots influence across much of Syrian civil society to be potentially capable of extending or undermining that acquiescence, meaning that Tehran's goodwill towards Russia is crucial for the latter's interests in Syria. This situation is likely only to deepen, as it is also highly probable that any settlement of the Syrian crisis will be heavily influenced by, and beneficial to, Tehran (Berman, 2017). It is therefore in Moscow's interests to remain in Iran's good graces to maintain its geopolitical interests in the region.

Simultaneously, it is beneficial to Russia to maintain leverage over Tehran through diplomatic and military assistance, so as to increase Moscow's utility and clout in international negotiation fora. Russia emerged from the P5+1 negotiations with Iran in a strong international position, having convinced Iran to submit to some weighty constraints on what Iran sees as necessary measures to ensure its own protection. In part this has led to Russia assuming a role of protector of Iran, but also as a guarantor of Iranian compliance. It is not in Russia's interests for Iran to renege on the deal, as any restarted nuclear programme will inevitably be discovered and will incur a fierce reaction from the international community. Undoubtedly, it will increase the volatility between Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, all of which are core Russian partners in the Middle East. It will also send Iran back under a sanctions regime. In the short term, this could benefit Russia as Iran will be forced to eschew Western markets, but overall the loss of purchasing power and economic potential will greatly reduce Iran's value to the beleaguered Russian economy.

GLOBAL STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

On an issue-by-issue, tactical basis, Iran and Russia have few convergent interests outside Syria. This is largely because Iran is not a global power and has influence and policy only for its immediate environment. Simultaneously, while Iran has interests in other Middle Eastern theatres, such as Yemen, Moscow's involvement is negligible. Perhaps the most obvious points of overlap would be in largely convergent views on the Caucasus, such as cooperation on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, and the largely divergent views on relations with other Middle Eastern players, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Russia maintains good relationships with both nations, while Iran is diametrically opposed to both. These disparities give credence to the idea that the Russian-Iranian collaboration is borne largely out of narrow convenience, shared interests in limited theatres, and a broader coalition to oppose the United States' power in the Middle East.

However, convergences of strategic policy and global outlook extend beyond Syria and other national theatres. For Russia, security is a phenomenon that includes economic potential (Bratersky, 2016). Economic development remains Russia's primary challenge (Karaganov, 2016), and Iran is a key player in the resources required for Russia's aspirations in Eurasia (Entin et al, 2016). As such, any anticipation of the longevity of the Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria must consider their economic and security interdependence across Eurasia. This includes recent measures put in place to advance the role of Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Gatev et al, 2016). In addition, Russia has taken the lead in Iranian nuclear development, with nuclear corporation ROSATOM supplying power and research for Iranian reactors (Ahmad et al, 2016).

The Caspian Sea represents a further area of complex cooperation. Geographically, the Caspian Sea lies between the nations of Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Though dominated by Russia, producers, consumers and transit have an important and overlapping economic relationship here (Srivastava, 2016: 8). Iran, unlike Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, has refused to accept a legal regime in the Caspian Sea via a 'modified median line' (MML) (Diba, 2014). The MML means that the seabed of the Caspian Sea would be divided amongst the 5 bordering states, according to relative share of the coastline. Alternatively, Iran would rather see an equal division of the Caspian between the 5 states, without a national sea border with Russia. In the forecasting of Russian-Iranian relations over a political settlement in Syria, these broader areas of the relationship may have an influential role. Given the state of economic interdependence, any disagreement over a political solution to the Syrian crisis may not impact on the relationship across Eurasia. Likewise, convergences external to Syria may provide the relationship some resilience against sensitive divergences over a political settlement.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Economic relations between Tehran and Russia have historically been as flexible and peculiar as their strategic partnership. When the shah sought to modernise Iran in the 60s, he accepted Russian loans, which were oftentimes at ridiculous rates and came with additional political conditions attached. This price had to be paid by the Iranian people, who suffered from severe austerity measures and high taxes. Thus the image of Russia remained twofold: a bank always willing to lend money and the facilitator of imperialism and autocracy (Rubin, 2016).

Due to its geostrategic location and cultural affinity with other states in Central Asia, Iran has always been an especially important trading partner for Russia. Moscow prioritizes trade with the oil-rich Persian Gulf and aims to balance its foreign policies among Iran, Iraq, and the GCC (the Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, in the face of multiple conflicting international relationships (Freedman, 2000). Currently, the two main factors characterising Iranian-Russian economic relations are their notorious arm deals and their rivalrous cooperation in the energy sector. As the former aspect will be addressed in the next chapter, the question of energy cooperation and competition will be analysed here by drawing more attention to its political rather than economic dimension. We will also try to look at the amount of trade between Iran and Russia and try to identify the main driving forces behind their economic cooperation.

Despite the geostrategic importance, Iran is not a major trading partner for Russia in raw economic terms, but rather a very minor one. In more than a decade, from 1996 to 2008, Iran contributed less than 0.8% of Russia's overall international trade volumes. During the first half of 2016 and with regard to Russia's non-primary exports, Iranian trade with Russia amounted to just \$856 million, making Iran Russia's 19th largest trade partner (Course and Teper, 2016). In comparison, Poland alone, at around half of Iran's population, received \$9.5bn of Russian exports in 2015.

Russian imports from Iran are primarily agricultural raw materials and food, which accounted for 71.2% of the total trade in 2012. 10.8% of these were chemical products and rubber, 9.0% mineral products, and 4.0% for vehicles and machinery (Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Despite Iran witnessing steady growth in imports from Russia between the 1990s and 2011, they have remained stagnant ever since. Meanwhile, Iranian exports to Russia increased, but they remained of a limited scope (Khan,

TRADE

2016). This appears to have changed in recent times, due to two key factors: increased Iranian economic power with the lifting of sanctions, and increased Russo-Iranian strategic cooperation. In 2016, yearly trade between Tehran and Moscow has increased tremendously, by up to 80 percent, according to Aleksandr Novak, Russian Energy Minister, and Russia has promised Iran a \$5 billion state loan to accelerate the industrial cooperation. This amount of money is supposed to raise trade from the current \$2 billion to an expected \$10 billion (RT Business, 2016). Furthermore, in the summer of 2016 Moscow issued two loans for Tehran, totaling \$2.5 billion (Trenin, 2016), continuing its historic role of generously banking for Middle Eastern societies.

Despite the growing general trade numbers, there has been a notably sharp decrease in Iranian-Russian maritime trade. According to the governor of Russia's main port of Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea, the seaborne trade with the Islamic Republic has fallen by 16% in 2016. Vague regulations, corrupted schemes, and complicated payments on both sides could be blamed for this. It is fascinating that this sector was more active in the period of harsh sanctions against Iran, but experts point out that this is probably because only Russians were bold and experienced enough to broker deals with the unclear and frequently corrupt Iranian companies (Wheeler and Desai, 2016).

To counter these bureaucratic barriers to free trade, several bilateral economic agreements on trading corridors or pipelines have been proposed. In addition to immediately increasing trade flows, the establishment of these structures is intended to indicate mutual trust and long-term cooperation. Most recently, the building of a 7,200-kilometer-long trading corridor linking Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan (the North-South Corridor) was planned and agreed to by the heads of these states at a trilateral summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, in August 2016 (Trenin, 2016). It would be impossible to accomplish this project without Russia's involvement, which should be the major contributor to the costly project as the Iranian economy is still recovering from long years of international sanctions. This project would also aim to engage Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, so there are also plans for a wider structured regional cooperation (Sputnik, 2016).

These trade figures suggest that Russo-Iranian economic cooperation is more important for Tehran than Moscow, but that neither party is particularly dependent on the other. Increasing trade flows also suggest that neither party is averse to increasing that dependence, indicating a degree of mutual trust in the other's commitment to the economic partnership. It is highly likely that trade will increase as the Iranian economy emerges from international sanctions with increased purchasing power and demands, although there have been hints that it may eschew Russian goods in favour of more sophisticated Western technology now that it has new markets open to

purchase from.

Russia and Iran each possess one of the world's largest oil and natural gas reserves, so it is particularly interesting to note how these natural rivals create space to cooperate and establish partnerships. The functioning of this coordinated energy policy is highly delicate, as there always exists competition over the European, Turkish, and Balkans markets (Khajehpour, 2014), but it also serves a useful geopolitical function.

Despite historical competition in oil and gas (Therme, 2014), the Russian Ministry of Economic Development views energy cooperation between the Russia and Iran as highly dynamic and promising. Indeed, this collaboration is entrenched in numerous strategic documents: in 2013, the meeting of Russian-Iranian Joint Working Group on Cooperation in the Field of Oil and Gas updated the so-called "road map" (originally drafted in 2010), outlining the next 30 years of cooperation in energy sector (Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2013). The fact that Russia developed and led this initiative is important, particularly for Iran, as it indicates long-term strategic investment in the partnership from the Russian political establishment.

The 'road map' in question provides "for the exchange of technical know-how, technologies and experience in oil and gas production, hydrocarbon processing, [and] conduction of geological exploration" (Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2013). This suggests that Russia has interests in bolstering Iran's ability to produce and export hydrocarbons. Indeed, along with the transfer of technologies, Russia was instrumental in removing Western sanctions on Iran through the negotiation of the JCPoA; ever since the Western sanctions were lifted in January 2016, Iran's oil exports have almost doubled (Glenn, 2016). However, Russia may be ruining the effects of this on their own oil economy, as the return of Iran's crude oil to international markets in times of decreasing oil prices has certainly not been beneficial for Moscow (Therme, 2015).

Russia have also been enthusiastically supporting Iran's nascent nuclear energy programmes. In November 2015, several months after the nuclear deal was brokered, Tehran was hosting the 3rd Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) Summit, prior to which Iranian Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh expressed his wish to see the cooperation talks between Iran and Russia put "into action", underscoring Iran's close ties with Russian energy companies (Shana, 2015). President Putin, attending the summit, promised to engage in the development of the Bushehr reactor in southwestern Iran and announced his plans to build two nuclear power plants in the country (Weitz, 2015). Moscow and Tehran have agreed to build four more reactors at other sites, which makes Iran's nuclear energy the country's only industry

ENERGY
RIVALS
&
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dominated by just one international company, Russia's Rosatom (Barmin, 2016). Furthermore, we can witness the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in the creation of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), which currently holds a similar status to that of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Khajehpour, 2014).

MILITARY COOPERATION

Russo-Iranian military cooperation is largely driven by the parochial international status of both nations. Russia is the most technologically-advanced country that is willing to sell to Iran, and, vice versa, Iran is sufficiently ideologically aligned to Russia's global interests that it is a suitable purchaser of Russian military hardware. This section examines how this relationship has developed in line with Iranian security requirements, and how Russia is attempting to position itself as the nation Iran continues to approach first for its military platforms and materiel.

For the past 25 years, the primary Iranian military objective has been to protect the State from threats posed by neighbouring countries as well as by its conventional enemies – the US and Israel. The 2015 nuclear agreement (JCPOA) has contributed to escalate regional conflicts, with the Arab States now posing new factual menaces to Iranian security. For instance, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen demonstrated that the Sunni are capable of working together and collectively responding to regional crises. Moreover, Iran's increased involvement in Middle Eastern conflict scenarios has increased Saudi fears of losing their dominant role in the region as well as posing an indirect threat to the al-Saud family's internal legitimacy as protector of the Sunni.

Nevertheless, these two rivals will probably try to achieve dominance through their proxies rather than by direct conflict, because of their military weaknesses and an unwillingness to risk their political stability. In fact, neither side has confidence in its own ability to obtain a consistent victory, yet both fear to undermine their own financial, commercial and political positions (such a conflict would indeed threaten oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz). An additional factor that mitigates the chances of a direct conflict between the two countries is the presence of US military bases in the Gulf.

Besides, the Iranian security dilemma is enhanced by the persistent condition of crisis and unrest in the Region - i.e. Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen - that has led Tehran to deploy military and paramilitary troops abroad in order to support allied factions and achieve positive effects towards the achievement of its strategic objectives.

In the face of what is perceived as an escalating range of security threats, Iran has started a long-term modernisation plan of its

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armed forces. In order to rapidly acquire new and advanced technologies, procurement from foreign companies is expected to grow gradually as the weapon embargo comes to an end in 2020.

Iranian military capabilities have been sorely affected by these several decades of embargo, which has limited Iran's access to modern military technologies and replacements for its ageing platforms. Although Iran has come to produce some spare parts, defence budget limitations and the international embargo have created capability gaps in relation to its perceived security requirements. Currently, despite the end of the economic embargo, many international restrictions still persist on conventional arms exports and will end only in mid-October 2020. That is, only if Iran meets its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, Vienna, July 2015) as well as the subsequent Security Council resolution 2231 - 20 July 2015 (UN S/2015/544 - JCPOA, S/RES/2231). According to the agreement signed with the P5+1 (China, Russia, France, the UK, the USA, plus Germany), Iran has agreed to start a nuclear (weapon) rollback in exchange for a sanction relief. Under the agreement, the UN Security Council will remove the ban on conventional weapons transfer after five years (October 2020) and will suspend the restrictions on ballistic missile activities after eight years (UN S/2015/544 - JCPOA, S/RES/2231).

During these decades of embargo, before the JCPOA, to counter trade limitations in the air and naval military sector, Iran invested consistently in various types of missile and USTs (unmanned systems technology) as well as radar technologies, in order to deter potential aggressors. Moreover, Tehran enhanced its land vehicles, munitions, and naval - mainly small surface and sub-surface - production capabilities. On the other hand, the indigenous production of aircraft and large surface and sub-surface capabilities did not register consistent results, primarily because of the inability of the national defence industry to develop and produce advanced military technologies (i.e. sensors, guidance technologies, and aircraft engines) to respond to the needs of the Armed Forces. Thus, Iran has been forced to adapt its military structure and military doctrine to tackle these capabilities gaps.

After the signing of the JCPOA, however, Iran has been able to access the international defence market and procure all the materials and supplies that were not explicitly included in the ban list. Furthermore, an exception in the treaty allowed individual arms sales on a case-by-case basis under authorisation of the UN Security Council (IHS Jane's, 2016). From the beginning, the

Russian Federation has shown its interest to re-start contracts that had been 'frozen' by Western pressures, and eventually signed new agreements with Tehran, re-entering *de facto* the Iranian defence market.

Since the end of the 1980s, Iran has acquired several military platforms and equipment from the Soviet Union. This relationship has continued with the Russian Federation, which has become a strategic supplier of modern military technologies. However, this commercial relationship has not always been constant. Throughout the years, Moscow has sold to Tehran different military technologies not only to replenish its inventory of conventional weapons and platforms (i.e. T-72, T-72S, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, SA-5, SA-6, SA-10, SA-12 SAMs, Su-24 and Su-25), but also to support its ballistic, chemical and biological programmes. In fact, in the last twenty years, the role of Russia has become even more crucial to Iran for the acquisition of know-how and advanced military technologies.

Nonetheless, Iran lost its access to Russian defence exports after the 2010 embargo, which caused Moscow to delay/cancel a series of relevant contracts (i.e. Su-30, MiG-31, Mi-17). Yet, in the aftermath of the signing of the agreement on the limitation of Iran's nuclear capabilities (JCPOA), the role of the Russian Federation has become, once again, pivotal to Iran in order to solve its defence capability gaps (TASS, 2016A). Incidentally, this commercial rapprochement is part of a more general strategy of cooperation pursued by Moscow and Tehran, both pursuing similar interests in the Broader Middle East (Gady 2015, Gady 2016A)

Hence, Iran's military procurement strategy has focused on three main areas:

- Acquisition of advanced missile technologies.
- Acquisition of advanced heavy armoured fighting vehicles (MBTs, IFVs).
- Modernisation of fighter aircraft.

IRANIAN PROCUREMENT OF RUSSIAN MILITARY TECHNOLOGIES

A solution for the missile technology requirement has been found in a 2007 contract for the S-300PMU1 missile system (NATO reporting name SA-10 'Grumble') which has been recently "defrosted". The delivery was cancelled by decree from the then President Dmitry Medvedev following pressures from Western countries in the aftermath of the UN Security Council's comprehensive ban of June 2010. However, Russia lifted the ban on the sale of the platform in April 2015 and maintained that the latter was defensive in nature and the embargo restriction was, therefore, not applicable (BBC 2016, Wilkins 2015).

ADVANCED
MISSILE
TECHNOLOGY –
S-300

The Iranian Defence Minister, Hossein Deghghan, confirmed the agreement on a contract for new missiles in August 2015, yet he did not mention the model of the missile system (Wilkin 2015). Moscow is believed to have offered the upgraded S-300VM Antey-2500, yet Iran seemed to have declined the proposal (BBC 2016). Moreover, the CEO of Rostec Corporation, Sergei Chemezov, after confirming the contract, indicated that the Iranians have opted for the old S-300PMU1 instead of even the S-300PMU2 (or SA-20 Gargoyle). He also noted that it would probably be the last delivery of this missile system abroad because it won't be produced anymore by Almaz-Altay (Sonne 2016, BBC 2016, Binnie and O'Connor 2016, Sputnik 2015).

Nonetheless, Chemezov himself seemed to contradict his statement in an interview given in June 2016, when he maintained that the platform selected was the S-300PMU2, allegedly produced for Syria back in 2013 and then scrapped (Sputnik 2015, Binnie and O'Connor 2016, BBC 2015).

At any rate, the delivery of the S-300 batteries started in April 2016 and according to Alexander Formin, the head of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, the programme was completed in October 2016 (BBC 2016, Binnie 2016, Kiselyova 2016, Sputnik 2016A). The acquisition of the S-300s represents an upgrade of Iranian obsolete air defence capabilities, providing Iran with the ability to intercept cruise missiles and short/medium ballistic missiles. Nonetheless, much would depend on the model of the missile system and the technical proficiency of the crew.

What is certain is that Iran has used the display of the SAM batteries to show off its new military capabilities to its domestic and foreign audience. Indeed, on the 28th of August 2016 Iranian media

affirmed that one S-300 system was deployed to the Fordow nuclear site (Associated Press 2016). This claim was supported by footage showing some parts of the system (TEL and radar). However, according to *IHS Jane's*, although some footage released by the Iranians could be geo-localised in the area of Fordow, the images showing the S-300 platform components could not (Binnie and O'Connor 2016).

Furthermore, satellite imagery of what is believed to be an air defence training base near Tehran shows two S-300 batteries but cannot reveal whether the platforms are the S-300PMU1 or the almost identical S-300PMU2 mounting 48N6E2 missiles - longer-range (Binnie and O'Connor 2016, Binnie 2016). Yet, the dilemma about the model of the missile systems actually sold by Russia to Iran can be solved by indicating the platform as the S-300PMU2, which is the one most likely available and affordable for Iran.

The modernization of the Iranian MBT fleet is a key issue for capability enhancement of the armoured divisions that are now equipped with less capable and efficient platforms compared to its regional rivals. For instance, the old fleets of T-72 (i.e. T-72M1 and the T-72S models) are outperformed by the M1A2s of the US and Saudi Arabia or by the Leclercs of the UAE.

On this account, however, the weapon embargo – set to last until late-2020 – and the low probability of an inter-state armed conflict could drastically change the priority of purchasing new MBTs. In fact, the most likely scenario of an active involvement of Iranian armed forces would be a mission to assist Shias separatists or Islamist militants abroad, circumstances for which the T-72s in service will likely suffice. Thus, the recapitulation of armoured ground vehicle divisions could be easily delayed until more critical requirements in other domains are met. Yet, Iran may still seek to acquire a small number of advanced MBTs in order to create elite land units.

Given this premise, Iran and Russia have both alluded to a possible procurement of T-90S MBT as a first step in the Iranian modernisation programme of land vehicles. Russian industries have showed their interests in establishing licensed production of the tank immediately after the end of the embargo in 2020 (Gady 2016A, TASS 2016B). Indeed, Alexey Zharich, deputy director general of Uralvagonzavod, has opened up to this possibility as well

ARMoured
FIGHTING
VEHICLES –
T-72 & T-90 MAIN
BATTLE TANKS

as to cooperate in the modernization of the T-72S tanks, thus restarting military technical cooperation with Iran effectively in late 2020 (Gady 2016A, TASS 2016B, Majumdar 2016).

However, evidence shows that the internal debate in Iran is still very lively, as part of the officials considers the indigenous Karrar MBT comparable and preferable to the T90S (FARS 2016). On the one hand, the transfer of technology and know-how from Russia spurring from the licensed production of T90s would be beneficial for the Iranian domestic defence industry (modern composite armour, more efficient engines technology and advanced fire control systems). On the other hand, similar technologies could be fitted on the T-72 chassis as upgrades, potentially achieving performance comparable to the new T90s. Whatever is the solution, the procurement will not occur in the short term, insofar as the embargo clauses, in this case, remain in place.

The Iranian Air Force fleet is ageing and its sustainment becomes ever more difficult because it is largely composed by US-sourced platforms (before 1979) and French, thus subject to sanctions on the acquisition of spares. Consequently, Iran needs to recapitalise large parts of its aircraft inventory, despite its efforts to procure the spares indigenously – or even via the black market – and maintain the platforms operative. Iran also tried to develop its own vectors with mixed results – in general the designs were based on the US-types already in the inventory, as the F-5-derived Azarakhsh (Lightning), Saeghe (Thunderbolt), Simorgh (Phoenix), etc. Nonetheless, the requirement for new aircraft to maintain combat effectiveness persists.

In February 2016, the Iranian Minister of Defence, General Hossein Dehghan, reportedly revealed that Iran was interested in acquiring the Sukhoi Su-30SM without stating, however, neither the numbers of vectors under negotiation nor the timeframe of delivery (IHS Jane's 2016, Gady 2016B, Sputnik 2016B, Todd Wood 2016). The Minister maintained that the deal with Russia would include the involvement of Iran in the manufacturing process in some capacity (IHS Jane's 2016). Indeed, by early 2016 the two countries were reportedly in advanced talks regarding the acquisition of an unspecified number of Su-30SM alongside the Yak-130 training aircraft. However, without the consensus of the UN Security Council Iran would be able to acquire the vectors only from October 2020 onwards. Furthermore, on the 5th of April 2016, the US government announced its veto in the UN Security Council to

FIGHTER AIRCRAFT – SU-30

block the sale, as it is deemed in violation of the UNSCR 2231. This prompted an immediate reaction by Moscow, which in turn sustained the legitimacy of the dealing (Zengerle 2016, Jennings 2016). At the time of writing no contract has been reached. Nonetheless, any deal would be effective only after the lifting of the embargo (October 2020).

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE RUSSO- IRANIAN RELATIONSHIP

As seen, the tentative Russo-Iranian coalition has been under stress in recent years, with the gradual rapprochement of Iran and the US under Obama and Rouhani. As well as the release of frozen funds and trade sanctions which look set to reduce Iranian dependence on Russian trade, there have been signs that Iran would prefer to deal with America over Russia. The December deals with Airbus and Boeing for large orders of commercial planes signified a willingness to overlook prior Russian relationships for superior technology from the West. Several commentators believe that Iran will continue this path of integration with the international community and will seek to develop relations with the West. An opposing school of thought holds that the past 30 years of sanctions will cause Iran to keep its distance from Western markets, for fear of ulterior interests and exploitation. However, at the crux of the matter is the fact that economic considerations and requirements outweigh ideological reservations. With the increasing quality of life and purchasing power, everyday Iranians will increasingly drive import demand for Western goods, and governmental procurement will not be far behind. There is also the point that some Iranian activities in Syria are not at odds with the West's objectives, insofar as they are both combatting Daesh terrorism and aim to retain the nation's territorial integrity. However, while the previous three years have witnessed dramatic leaps in Iran's rapprochement with the West, it is almost inevitable that Trump's administration will drastically reduce this improvement, if not eradicating it completely.

To conclude: while Internal and external factors in each countries will define their overall bilateral relations: the economic, diplomatic and military cooperation between both countries will continue in the Middle East.

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