

Russia-Iran Rapprochement against the U.S. Hegemony in West Asia

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Russia-Iran ties for the past two decades mainly focus on the need to overcome the hegemonic role of the U.S. in West and Central Asia. However, both countries have different strategies and objectives to overcome the U.S. threat. During the period of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Moscow-Tehran relations witnessed more stability for various reasons. Russia's close geopolitical advantage in West Asia was not fully realised due to the close ties between the U.S. and its traditional regional powers like GCC countries, Israel, Iraq and Turkey. To overcome the situation, Russia had the only option to move toward the countries which were not friendly with the U.S. Hence, Iran was the leading country which exploited the situation. For more than two decades, Iran has been the victim of the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. for its nuclear programmes. Russia opposes the attempt for NATO expansion near its border for security reasons. The imposition of economic sanctions by the U.S. and its ally against Russia in the Ukraine crisis consolidated the relations between Moscow and Tehran. The paper focuses on the prospects of the Russia-Iran ties to undermine the U.S. hegemony in West Asia.

Keywords: Russia, Iran, Relations, U.S., West Asia

The emerging friendship between Russia and Iran is viewed as a challenge to the hegemony of the U.S. at the global level, especially in Central and West Asia. Many factors led to the development of closer ties between these countries. Iran has been struggling hard with the international sanction by the U.N. under the direction of the United States since 2006 for failing to comply with the nuclear weapon non-proliferation treaties. Moreover, many other economic sanctions have also been imposed on Iran. During such sanctions' initial phase, Russia supported the U.N. resolutions. However, Russia followed the policy of neutrality towards the US-Iran tensions. This tactic was based on the realisation of Iran as a potential economic power, as no other state in the region was ready to move closer to Russia. There were incidents when Russia and Iran followed the same policy, which went against the U.S. interest, especially during the Syrian crisis. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia showed more interest in resolving the deadlock between Iran and the West over the nuclear issue. As Iran was disillusioned with an attempt to resolve the economic sanctions from the West, Russia also faced similar sanctions for the Ukraine crisis. In this context, it is significant to examine how Russia and Iran relations would effectively challenge the existing U.S. hegemony in West and Central Asia.

Background

For the first time, Russia and Iran have moved much closer since the Islamic revolution of 1979 by placing new realities in the international scenario. The first incident was when in May 1995, Russian President Yeltsin declined U.S. President Clinton's request to stop a \$1 billion sale to Iran of a light water nuclear reactor. Ironically, West Germany initially agreed to support this project in the late 1970s when Shah was ruling Iran. With the emergence of the Islamic Revolutionary government in Iran, the West put an end to all the existing agreements with Iran. One of the early objections came from U.S. President Clinton that Iran should not be allowed to acquire weapons of mass destruction, which would threaten the security of the Gulf region. According to Russia, it was the same reactor the USA offered to Pakistan, a country which has not signed the Non-proliferation Treaty. However, the U.S. continued to influence Russia not to go ahead with the nuclear deal. Russia viewed it as an attempt to deprive the opportunity to strengthen the market for its nuclear technology. Iran highly appreciated the Russian determination to support nuclear power development. In September 1995, Russia agreed to sign a contract to build two more nuclear power reactors in Iran. (Tarock, 1997).

However, Russia could not take solid strategic decisions against the U.S. interest in the years following the post-cold war scenario. When the U.S. was concerned with the Iranian nuclear developments, Russia desperately needed financial support from Western countries to save its economy. As such, Russia gradually accepted American pressure to freeze its ties with Iran to overcome its economic crisis. It led to the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995, which was signed under U.S. pressure as part of reconciliation between Moscow and Washington. According to this agreement, the Russian government agreed to stop exporting military supplies to the Islamic Republic by 1999 and to conclude no new deals with Iran. (Dunaeva, 2013, p.446) Despite this issue, Russian-Iran cooperation continued in other areas. In the first Chechen War, during 1994- 96, Iran extended support for the Russian Federation's territorial integrity, which Moscow welcomed. Similarly, Iran remained silent about Moscow's attacks in Chechnya. Furthermore, Russia and Iran cooperated to end the five-year Tajik Civil War (1992-1997) (Kozhanov, 2015).

Russia stopped exports of military aid to Iran in 2000 to satisfy the provisions of the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement. However, these steps came with a high price for Russia, as its military-industrial complex incurred a loss of \$3 billion. Moreover, the Americans revealed clandestine deals with Russia during the 2000 presidential race. Hence, in turn, it seriously harmed Russian-Iranian relations. Since then, Iran has adopted a cautious approach in its deals with Russia as it has no other alternative power to depend on for defence trade. When Vladimir Putin assumed the President of Russia in 2000, he immediately cancelled the deals with America on the defence exports to Iran. As such, once again, Russia showed keen interest in supporting the defence needs of Iran. (Islam 2013, p.261).

The Nuclear Cooperation

Iran's fundamental objective behind the relationship with Russia was to develop nuclear energy, which was viewed as a threat to security in West Asia. Shah of Iran signed the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty in May 1974 when the U.S. fully cooperated with Iran. In addition, Iran was the first state in the region to submit a

draft resolution to the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 that proposed a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East (Kerr 2009). As Shah was able to win the trust of the West, he formulated an ambitious vision for the nuclear program, to build about twenty-three nuclear plants by the end of the 20th century. The construction of two 1,200-megawatt light water reactors to produce nuclear energy at Bushehr was entrusted to West German company Kraftwerk Union, a subsidiary of Siemens. However, with the overthrow of Shah's regime in 1979, this ambitious plan ended. Although the new regime of the Islamic Republic was not interested in the nuclear programme initially, the use of chemical weapons by Iraq and the passive response of the U.S. and the United Nations against this crime motivated Tehran to emerge as a nuclear power. Hence, the Islamic Republic decided to develop the Bushehr Nuclear project. Russia was the first country which showed a keen interest in the project (Vaez and Sadjadpour, 2013).

A contract was signed in January 1995 between Russia and Iran to complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant. (Koolaee et al, 2021). Russia's Atomstroyexport company was entrusted with the task of nuclear power plant development. In the 2005 agreement, Russia agreed to supply fuel to the plant with the condition that Iran would not use spent fuel to build a nuclear bomb. Furthermore, the nuclear power plant operation will be managed by Russian experts, who will also train Iranian personnel. The first shipment of LEU fuel to Iran was sent by Atomstroyexport on December 16, 2007, and by the end of January 2008, the last shipment to the reactor also arrived. However, the functioning of the reactor was delayed due to the political pressure from the U.S. demanding Iran comply with the UNSC Resolutions (UNSCR). At last, the power plant was launched on August 21 2010, by loading fuel into the plant with Russia's assistance. At the official ceremony, the Chief of the Iranian nuclear plant, Ali Akbar Salehi, said, "Despite all pressure, sanctions and hardships imposed by Western nations, we are now witnessing the start-up of the largest symbol of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities" (Harding, 2010).

In an agreement signed by Russia and Iran, which the IAEA approved, the responsibility of the operating plant would be vested with Russia by supplying the nuclear fuel and managing the spent fuel for another three years before passing complete control on to Iran (Novosti, 2011). From the very beginning, the U.S. opposed the Russia-Iran nuclear deals stating that it would help Iran's nuclear weapons programme. But this argument was rejected by Russia, citing the operation under IAEA safeguards. Moreover, the UNSCR has severely regulated the supply of nuclear-related materials to Iran. However, Russia has ignored the U.S. warnings about the deals with Iran. In the meantime, Iran and Russia had several discussions about building additional reactors. Iran has a plan to build 19 nuclear power plants. (Islam, 2013, p.254)

The Russian assistance to Iran's nuclear energy development witnessed a series of challenges from the US-led West. Iran was labelled as the "Axis of Evil" by the Bush Administration immediately after the 9/11 event. As such, the U.S. had issued many warnings to Russia regarding Nuclear assistance to Iran, which they viewed as a threat to the security of West Asia. According to Moscow, its nuclear assistance to Tehran is legal as Iran is a signatory of the NPT. Hence Iran has every right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Moreover, Russia opposed several U.N. sanctions against Iran, at the same time supporting limited sanctions. The Russian policy was based on geopolitical realities by not antagonising the West. However,

the Russian priority was to promote its interest in West Asia by building strong relations with Iran, as there was no other alternative power in the region. (Parker, 2012)

When Ahmadinejad assumed as the President of Iran in 2005, the relationship with the U.S. worsened as he was not ready to compromise with the U.S. and its allies regarding the sanctions against Iran on the nuclear development issue. As a representative of the conservative group in Iran, Ahmadinejad was keen on developing nuclear power plants to strengthen the influence of Iran in West Asia against Israel and U.S. interests. In his speech at the 16th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Ahmadinejad highlighted the inalienable right of Iran to have access to a nuclear fuel cycle. Moreover, he stressed the objective of Iran to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes by cooperating fully with the IAEA. In this context, he condemned the double standard of the U.S. for transferring nuclear technology to Israel, which is not a signatory of the NPT. (United Nations, 2005). However, the attempts of the West, led by the U.S., to attack the nuclear installation in Iran were effectively defended by the Russian intervention.

During the period of Dmitry Medvedev as the President (2008-12), Russia maintained restricted relations with Iran to appease the U.S. and the West. In response to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Russia deferred its arms delivery to Tehran. During the Obama period, Russia under Dmitry Medvedev attempted to re-establish close relations with the U.S. It adversely affected Iran's attempt to strengthen nuclear cooperation with Russia. An essential outcome of this was the Russian sanctions against Iran as part of supporting UNSC Resolution 1737. In a statement issued by Dmitry Medvedev on "Measures to implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929 dated June 9, 2010" on September 22, 2010, Russia barred the delivery of tanks, armoured vehicles, large calibre cannons, warplanes, helicopters, warships, and S300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran. Furthermore, Russia also banned all the financial dealings related to Iran's nuclear programme. (Omelicheva, 2012) Russia received some benefits from the U.S. for its actions against Iran. Some of the important benefits include the expansion of NATO to Ukraine and Georgia suspended; the deployment of the third zone of American anti-missile system elements in Eastern Europe also suspended; initiated to sign START 3; Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation received U.S. consent; the decision to resume Russian-NATO Council etc (Elaheh et al., 2020).

The return of Putin as the President of Russia in 2012 again shifted the scene in favour of Iran. Once again, Putin prioritised maintaining a close relationship with Iran, ignoring the U.S. warnings and offers. In a meeting with Ahmadinejad on June 7, 2012, Putin reiterated Russian interest in strengthening relations with Iran. During the meeting, both leaders decided to proceed with nuclear cooperation. (Kozhanov, 2015) Followed by this, the Syrian crisis laid the ground for the intensive relations between Russia and Iran. During this period Russia became more active in West and Central Asia. Russian airstrike against the groups which opposed Bashar al-Assad in Syria in September 2015 was a setback for U.S. interests in the region. (Grajewski, 2021). During the eight years of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, the relationship between Tehran and Moscow focused on mutual benefit. During this period, Russia and Iran concentrated more on protecting their interest without compromising the U.S. demands. Iranian cooperation with Russia on Syria was recognised by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, in his meeting with Putin in November 2015.

(Kozhanov, 2017). The Russian military intervention to defend the Syrian regime strengthened the relationship between Russia and Iran. Russia and Iran viewed the attempt by the US-led powers to unseat the Assad regime as a threat to the interest of their geostrategic location. The cooperation between Russia and Iran was emphasised since the Syrian crisis to protect their strategic interests in West Asia, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Moreover, both the powers were in search of the formation of new security orders in Central Eurasia, West Asia and the Persian Gulf. Hence, Iran and Russia were looking for new alliances in the region connecting Syria and Iraq, which could transform existing structures in West Asia. (Ghadbeigy, 2017, p.10).

Impact of Ukraine Crisis

The Russia-Ukraine crisis was the last incident which indirectly united Iran with Moscow. The annexation of Crimea by Russia from Ukraine in 2014 spoiled the possibility of a friendly relationship between Moscow and the NATO powers. Putin's decision to annex Crimea was based on the emerging situation of Ukraine's plan to get admission to NATO. At the very outset, Russia was against any plan of NATO to expand its borders. (Mearsheimer 2014). When Ukraine was moving closer to NATO, Russia attacked Ukraine by invading its several parts, creating tension in Europe in February 2022. The Russian invasion, which continued after several months, caused the death of hundreds of Ukrainian civilians and several cities and places were razed to the ground. Many nations openly condemned the Russian aggression by sympathising with Ukraine. However, Iran supported Russian aggression by blaming NATO's expansionist move. Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran, remarked, "The U.S. dragged Ukraine to where it is now. By interfering in Ukraine's internal affairs, creating colour revolutions and toppling one government and putting another in power, the U.S. dragged Ukraine into this situation." (Caner, 2022).

For Iran, the Ukraine issue was a golden opportunity to cement its ties with Russia. During this period, the relationship between these countries expanded on both bilateral and multilateral levels. The official data shows that the trade volume between Tehran and Moscow increased to 89.4 % in 2021 from the previous year. An interim agreement to establish a free trade zone was implemented in 2019 between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). It was viewed as a step toward Iran's full membership in the union. When the U.S. withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA), Iran showed a particular interest in developing ties with Russia and China in its so-called "Look to the East" policy. Moreover, Russia's commitment to supporting Iran's nuclear development led to close cooperation between these powers. Finally, Iran wholeheartedly welcomed the Russian statement blaming the U.S. and NATO for the Ukraine crisis. (Azizi, 2022)

Contradictions in the Relations

Despite smooth relations between Russia and Iran for the past two decades, several contradictions were also visible in their policies. The most visible contradiction between Iran and Russia is in ideological relations. Russia is a secular authoritarian state close to the orthodox church, while Iran is an Islamic theocratic state. Both of them want to regain their past glory with their current background. At the same time, there is an invisible mistrust based on their historical past relations. Iran maintains a negative image of czarist conquests and the attempt of the former Soviet

Union at domination; for Russia, Persian evasiveness and duplicity are significant concerns. (Trenin, 2016).

On the question of the nuclear deals, there were several differences between Iran and Russia. Although Russia recognises Iran as a major power in West Asia, it wants to minimise Tehran as a non-nuclear weapons state. At the very outset, the U.S. was against the Russian nuclear deal with Iran. In the late 1990s, Russia consistently demanded Iran's compliance with the provisions of the IAEA, despite repeated pressure from the United States. During the period of Medvedev, Russia showed keen interest in developing ties with the West. As a part of it, he and U.S. President Obama set in motion the "Reset" policy to develop bilateral relations. Russia suspended its arms delivery to Iran to appease the U.S. interest, accepting the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1929 in June 2010. Furthermore, to support the UNSC Resolution 1737 against Iran in 2010, Russia imposed sanctions against Iran. However, the situation shifted when Putin returned as the President (Koolae et al, 2020).

Russia showed its displeasure over the pro-Iran group like Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a sectarian politic-military wing, Russia has demonstrated its reservations, especially regarding violent activities. Moreover, Russia was not ready to support Hezbollah's activities, which would affect its relations with other countries in the region, especially Israel. When Iran supported Houthi tribes in the civil war in Yemen, Russia kept its neutrality, fearing it would damage its relationship with Saudi Arabia. All of these show that Russia was least interested in the Sunni-Shia sectarian rivalry. (Trenin, 2016). However, since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, both Iran and Russia set aside their differences to move closer as they have similar challenges.

Iran viewed Russia's relationship with other countries in the region, especially Israel, with much apprehension. Iran and Israel have been arch rivals in West Asia since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Moreover, Iran is competing with Israel and Saudi Arabia as a regional hegemon. An important foreign policy objective of Iran was to annihilate Israel. Russian tie with Tehran was an obstacle for Israel to strike major nuclear sites inside Iran. Moreover, Israel does not want to risk spoiling its good relations with Russia on Iran's nuclear issue. The agreement between Putin and Netanyahu in September 2015 was about the cooperation in using the airspace over Syria which was against the interest of Tehran. (Averbukh and Klein, 2018) Here, Iran has its reservation about Russia's relations with Israel. Nevertheless, Iran kept silent on the matter since it is not directly affecting its close ties with Russia. Similarly, due to sectarianism, Iran does not maintain normal relations with Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia does not recognise Iran's Islamic revolutionary government. There were a series of tensions in their relations over different issues. Although Saudi Arabia and Israel are close partners of the U.S., they have no problem maintaining good ties with Russia. As such, Russia tries to build a normal relationship with all countries in the region for its economic interest. Hence, Russia was cautious in maintaining a balance between Saudi-Israeli relations with Iran.

To Challenge the U.S. Hegemony

An important uniting factor for the Russia-Iran ties is the challenge posed by the U.S. in multiple ways. Iran and Russia were with the official part of Syria in the Syrian crisis against the US-led West supporting the opposition groups. Iran viewed Russia

as the region's primary security partner in the Syrian crisis. It was a 'counter-terrorism' cooperation of Iran with Russia to support Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria against the rise of Sunni-jihadist forces. After the successful operation of the military in Syria, the Iranian President commented that it "can be applied to the Caucasus and Afghanistan as well". (Saraswat, 2022) The geopolitical convergence of Russia and Iran in the Caucasus and Central Asia region was mainly to oppose the expansion of NATO. At the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Foreign Minister of Iran, Hossein Amirabdollahian, said that the root cause of the crisis was the provocations from NATO. (Motamedi, 2022) Russia viewed the expansion of NATO as a threat to international security. Russia raised it in most of the negotiations with the U.S. since 1990. For Iran, the NATO expansion aims for cultural, economic and social domination other than military expansion. Khamenei coined the "cultural NATO" in November 2006, which received much attention in the think tanks and the media of Iran. (Salami, 2022).

One of the crucial elements that united Russia and Iran was the international sanctions imposed by the U.S. Iran has been facing different types of international sanctions because of its nuclear project. However, an effort had been made by Obama to ease sanctions against Iran under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. It was a detailed agreement reached by the U.S., Russia, China, France, Germany, Britain and Iran. Later, the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 endorsed this nuclear deal. However, in May 2018, President Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and re-imposed all economic sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program that had been previously lifted. Russia condemned the U.S. decision to withdraw from the JCPOA (Seyrafi, 2018).

On the other hand, the U.S. imposed international sanctions against Russia in 2014. As a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the U.S. and the European Union imposed several sanctions against Russia in March 2014. The second round of sanctions was imposed in July-August 2014 to react to the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 with a Russian missile. (Korhonen, 2019, p.19). However, Russia continued its policy of challenging the global hegemon policy of the U.S. by expanding its interest in West and Central Asia. With this objective, Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war with the support of Iran. It was also a retaliation to the air battle conducted by the U.S. and ally over Libya to force Qadhafi out in 2011. The Russian role in the Syrian civil war was the most successful challenge to the U.S. interest in West Asia. As part of rescuing the Syrian President, Russia waged a large-scale air campaign along with land and naval initiative. Moreover, a series of official visits with traditional U.S. allies in the region by Russia to strengthen relations was another setback to the U.S. interest. (Al-Qassab, 2017) For Russia, promoting a powerful Iranian presence in West Asia was very important that could withstand the goals and policies of the United States and Europe and their allies in the region.

The Ukraine crisis was the most recent issue that triggered tension in Russia-US relations in 2021. The situation impacted Russia's relations with the countries in West Asia. The crisis indirectly promoted Iran's ties with Russia, as Tehran was a vital power to counter the U.S. and its allies' strategies to move against Moscow. At the very outset of the crisis, Russia effectively communicated its policy in its war against Ukraine to protect its national interest from the possible expansion of NATO to its boundary. Besides Iran, Russia also received solidarity from Syria, Hezbollah

in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. Most other countries in West Asia were not ready to condemn Russia as it might affect the economic relations with Moscow. As such, the immediate objective of Russia to emerge as an effective challenger to the U.S. interest was realised by attacking Ukraine. The U.S. expectation to isolate Russia in the Ukraine war failed as Moscow successfully countered the former's strategies. Moreover, the decision of China to support Russia was another setback for the U.S. hegemony (Sinkkonen, 2022).

Conclusion

The emerging trend in the Russia -Iran ties mainly focuses on the strategies to check the U.S. hegemony. Iran has been the victim of economic sanctions for its nuclear programmes for the past three decades. Moreover, the U.S. involvement in West Asian affairs prevented the leading countries in the region to make any relations with Iran. As such, Iran was waiting for an opportunity to break the situation. Putin's accession as the President of Russia led to a favourable position for Iran to emerge as a powerful regional hegemon. Many factors led to the strong ties between Russia and Iran. For Russia, it was not easy to be involved in the affairs of West Asia without any close relations with the countries in the region. Russia's close geopolitical advantage in West Asia was not fully realised due to the strong ties between the U.S. and its traditional regional powers like GCC countries, Israel, Iraq and Turkey. To overcome the situation, Russia had the only option to move towards the countries which were not friendly with the U.S. Hence, Iran was the leading country which exploited the position. Moreover, Russia was well aware of the benefit of the nuclear deal with Iran. In the meantime, Russia moved tactfully toward Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey for trade relations. The US-Russian strategic competition has become a reality since the Arab Spring in 2011. Initially, the U.S. received supremacy by removing colonel Ghaddafi from Libya. However, Russia retaliated against the U.S.'s role in the Syrian crisis by protecting the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. The intervention in the Syrian crisis enhanced the status of Russia close to the global hegemon. Unlike the U.S., Russia maintains normal relations with all the countries in West Asia. For Iran, another global hegemon is imperative to overcome the barriers created by the U.S. Russia-Iran relations have been progressing on this line for the past few years.

The Ukraine crisis was the last event that tested the competition between Russia and the U.S. Although Russia could not find an easy victory over Ukraine, its immediate objective of preventing the NATO expansion found success. Moreover, the U.S. and its ally's decision to impose economic sanctions against Russia was not effective as expected. The U.S. failed to obtain much support from West Asia against Russia as most countries, except Israel, were not ready to condemn Russian aggression. The West Asian countries were not prepared to spoil the existing trade relations with Russia. Iran is the most beneficiary of the Russian-American competition in the region. Now, Russia-Iran relations are centred on opposing the U.S. hegemony. The outcome of the Ukraine crisis would be crucial in determining the future course of action between Russia and Iran against the U.S. in the region.

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