The limits of the Russian–Iranian strategic alliance: its history and geopolitics, and the nuclear issue

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The Russian and Iranian governments define their relations as ‘very close’ and ‘strategic’ in many areas. The frontiers of this cooperation, in geopolitical terms, include the south Caucasus, central Asia, Afghanistan, and the oil- and natural gas-rich Caspian basin, while, at the issue level, the cooperation includes the nuclear issue, disarmament, the struggle against terrorism, the Iraqi quagmire, the Palestinian problem, and the US military expansion into Eurasia. The signs of cooperation in these areas are, among others, regular political dialogue and similar attitudes in refusing to include the Lebanese Hizballah on terrorist lists, pursuing political relations with Hamas, maintaining a pro-Arab position on the Arab–Israeli question, objecting to foreign military engagement in Eurasia, and having a common voice during the Israeli–Lebanese conflict in 2006. However, we need to discover the nature of these relations in order to decide whether the close Russian–Iranian relations can be described as a strategic alliance. What is the strategic depth of Russian–Iranian relations? Do the relations consist merely of the conjectural necessities of the post-Cold War period? What are the ‘red lines’ in Russian–Iranian relations? This article analyzes the relations between these two countries from a broader perspective, to examine the meaning of the relations in bilateral, regional and international contexts.

Introduction

There is serious concern in the international community that Iran aims to develop nuclear weapons while using its peaceful nuclear program as a smokescreen. The discussions on the Iranian nuclear issue have been dominated by the worries of the United States, which is attempting large-scale restructuring in the Middle East through military and political means. The US government has invaded Afghanistan and Iraq and has initiated a political reform project in the Middle East. In such an environment, the US government considers the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran to be a mortal blow to all these activities and projects. Toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this concern is not limited to the United States and Israel, but now extends to the Western world in general. It is interesting to observe that Russia and China share these worries, since they voted for the UN Security Council resolutions against Iran. These two countries have been more patient and tolerant on the Iranian nuclear issue than the United States and the EU-3 (Germany, France and the UK).

Of these two, Russia has been the more active partner of Iran on the nuclear issue despite continuing criticism that this partnership serves Iran’s alleged attempt to

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acquire nuclear weapons. Eyes turn to Russia whenever the Iranian nuclear issue comes to the fore in the form of an escalation of tension between the United States and Iran or in any other way. Russia holds an important position in the Iranian nuclear issue in the international arena and in bilateral terms with Iran. Russia is helping Iran build nuclear reactors, despite the concerns of the international community, led by the United States, that Russia does not pay enough attention to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. The change of Russian attitudes in the Security Council is an interesting development and should be carefully analyzed in bilateral, regional and international contexts, especially considering its long-term partnership with Iran on the nuclear issue.

Although the nuclear issue has played a considerable role in Russian–Iranian cooperation, it is not the only factor contributing to this relationship. If we look at the issue from a broader perspective, there seems to be a complex web of relations in a multilateral framework. The Russian and Iranian governments define their relations as ‘very close’ and ‘strategic’ in many areas. The frontiers of this cooperation, in geopolitical terms, include the south Caucasus, central Asia, Afghanistan, and the oil- and natural gas-rich Caspian basin. At the issue level, the cooperation includes disarmament, the struggle against terrorism, the Iraqi quagmire, the Palestinian problem, and the US military expansion into Eurasia. The signs of cooperation in these areas are, among others, regular political dialogue and similar attitudes in refusing to include the Lebanese Hizballah on terrorist lists, pursuing political relations with Hamas, maintaining a pro-Arab position on the Arab–Israeli question, objecting to foreign military engagement in Eurasia, and having a common voice during the Israeli–Lebanese conflict in 2006. There is no doubt that overlapping interests in some of these issues foster cooperation in other areas.

There are numerous reasons in the background for this Russian–Iranian rapprochement and pragmatic convergence of specific interests in the previously mentioned realms. However, we need to discover the nature of these relations in order to decide whether the close Russian–Iranian relations can be called a strategic alliance. What is the strategic depth of Russian–Iranian relations? Do the relations consist merely of the conjectural necessities of the post-Cold War period? What are the ‘red lines’ in Russian–Iranian relations? We will analyze the relations between these two countries from a broader point of view to examine the meaning of the relations in bilateral, regional and international contexts.

**Historical background**

The history of Russian–Iranian relations consists of a complex web of relations shaped by realpolitik, pragmatism and national interests.¹ These relations go back to the sixteenth century and have not been positive for most of this time, in particular from the Iranian side. The common areas in relations between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were trade and the Ottoman threat.² The following two centuries witnessed a new era in the relations between Russia and Iran, in particular with the Russian inclination toward eastern territories. As a result, Iran was no longer an ally, but a potential area of influence and expansion for the architects of Russian foreign policy.
Not surprisingly, Iran became a battleground of Anglo–Russian rivalry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As described by Kulagina, there was no single, major, political and social development in which Russia or Great Britain did not interfere in Iran. Although Iran was not among the warring sides in World War I, it was in the middle of the struggle between the paired alliances of Germany–Ottoman Empire and Britain–Russia. After the October 1917 revolution in Russia, Russian influence in Iran substantially decreased. The newly established Soviet Union and Iran signed a cooperation and friendship agreement in February 1921. The interwar period witnessed ups and downs in the relations between the Soviet Union and Iran. In the 1930s, Iran distanced itself from the Soviet Union and approached Germany. Subsequently, German–Iranian relations reached their peak just before the start of World War II. As a result, the Soviet Union and Britain occupied Iran in 1941. American and British soldiers left Iran after the war, but the Soviet Union attempted to preserve its control over Iran. As part of this, the Soviet administration created the autonomous republics of Azerbaijan and Mehabad. However, Iran put an end to these republics after the Soviet withdrawal in 1946.

In the aftermath of World War II, Iran attempted to approach the Western bloc due to the threats emanating from the Soviet Union. Iran established close relations with the United States and received military support from it between 1947 and 1969. The relations between Russia and Iran evolved on a scale from a harsh anti-Soviet position to normalization. Cooperation on nuclear matters and improving Iranian military capabilities were at the core of Iranian relations with the Western bloc. The Western fear of Soviet expansion put Iran in an important position and secured Western aid to the country during the early phases of the Cold War. A pro-Western Iran was a strategic asset that had to be secured from any Soviet influence. However, the Iranian establishment’s international endeavors and attempts at Western style modernization failed to find enough support at home and faced severe criticism by the leftist and Islamist segments of Iranian society. The Western-leaning Shah of Iran was overthrown by a popular revolt organized by left-wing intellectuals and religious leaders in Iran. After this revolt, the influential Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini eliminated his rivals and established an Islamic regime in Iran in February 1979.

There was an expectation of an improvement in Iran–Soviet relations due to the anti-American nature of the revolution. However, after the revolution, the makers of Iranian foreign policy began to present the Soviet Union as an ideological rival. The Soviet government’s attempts to establish ties with Iran failed, as Khomeini declared the United States and the Soviet Union to be the leading enemies of Islam. Khomeini persisted in this position, and the Soviet Union and the United States were both denounced as enemies in public protests in Iran. The Soviet government’s pro-Iraqi position during the Iran–Iraq war fueled anti-Soviet sentiment in Iran.

There emerged signs of change in Iranian foreign policy toward the end of the 1980s. Iran faced the devastating effects of the Iran–Iraq war, leaving it in a state of regional and international isolation. The Iranian government recognized that its policies united all the West with the United States, and its radical rhetoric disturbed, if not irritated and frightened, other Islamic countries. Iranian foreign policy thus shifted to a more pragmatic line after jettisoning the earlier slogans of ‘exporting revolution’ and ‘neither East nor West.’ Prominent figures in the Iranian government, such as Hashemi Rafsanjani, aimed to free Iran from its isolation. Therefore,
they attempted to improve relations with the countries in their immediate neighborhood. The Soviet Union was chosen as the first country with which to improve bilateral relations.

The early signal of the development of relations was Khomeini’s letter to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on 11 January 1989. Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Iran on 26 February 1989. Rafsanjani, as head of the Iranian parliament, paid an official visit to Moscow and signed a number of agreements during his visit. These reciprocal contacts led to Iran’s acceptance of Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The relations shifted from dialogue to cooperation after these initial attempts. The dissolution of the Soviet Union meant the disappearance of a serious threat to Iran that had existed for the past 200 years. However, the emergence of new republics in the area created uncertainties and a new geopolitical environment. The increasing US pressure on Iran, the hostile regional environment, and the domestic political situation forced Iran to search for regional and international allies. The earlier Soviet attempt to gain Iranian friendship was succeeded by Iranian attempts to secure cooperation with Russia.5

As mentioned, Iran was a battleground in the rivalry between Russia and Great Britain in the nineteenth century. Iran was a passive actor in this context. The new situation was a similar one; only, the United States had replaced Britain. The Iranian government was attempting to reproduce the nineteenth-century context in the conflict between Russia and the United States. However, this time it was planning to play an active role in the new geopolitical setting.6 The Russian side was also willing to pursue closer relations with Iran in partial compensation for its weakening geopolitical position in the area due to the end of the Warsaw Pact, the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the enlargement of NATO and the European Union (EU), and the emergence of a new balance of power in the Black Sea, Caucasus and central Asian regions.7 The Iranian attitude was considered an opportunity for the Russian government, which was faced with the difficulties of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.8 Moscow was trying very hard to deal with the changing regional situation and internal political problems. The nationalist and conservative segments of Russian society began to question the reforms of 1991 and 1992, which were far from meeting the expectations of the Russian people.

Geopolitical concerns

The withdrawal of Soviet hegemony in the former Soviet south led to a new regional situation and a search for influence by regional powers—namely, Turkey, Iran and Russia. In addition, there were a number of external actors, such as the United States, the EU, China and Israel, intent on creating their spheres of influence in this area. The change in the bipolar world order and the new dynamics of Russia forced Russian policymakers to restructure their former foreign and security policies. As a result, there emerged a new ‘Foreign Policy Concept,’ which was accepted in the spring of 1993.

Russian policymakers preserved their cautious approach to Iran, despite their willingness to cooperate with that country. Indeed, this attitude was not something specific to Russian foreign policy, but was the result of Iranian policies on regional and international issues.9 In other words, the reason for this cautious policy was the
existence of multiple voices and perspectives in Iran on foreign policy issues. This attitude was also seen in relations with Russia. For example, some pragmatic politicians were in favor of developing relations with Russia, while others argued that Russia was the champion of atheism and was a ‘small Satan’ practicing anti-Islamic activities in former, Muslim-populated Soviet lands. There were also proponents of engaging in conflict with Russia to acquire the former Iranian territories seized by the Russians. The pro-Western Russian political elite highlighted the problem of Iranian reliability and also the Iranian risk factor in relations with the United States and the West in general.

This caution found its expression in the Russian ‘Foreign Policy Concept,’ which was approved by Russian President Boris Yeltsin on 23 April 1993. In a section titled ‘Relations with the Muslim Countries of Southern and Western Asia,’ this document states, with reference to Iranian relations: There are geo-strategically important countries, which did not determine their directions in this region. This situation constitutes one source of instability, contains a dangerous unpredictability and obscures general political development of the region. An example of this situation is Iran, which is no longer an ally of the United States and also not close to us.

The expectation that there would be intense regional competition among Turkey, Iran and Russia was reduced in the early 1990s to only regional rivalry between Turkey and Russia. The architects of Russian foreign policy evaluated Iranian policies as not being problematic for their policies in central Asia and the Caucasus, but as reflecting pragmatic attitudes, which sometimes even contributed to Russian policy in this region. The predominant perspective was to monitor Turkish activities. The Iranian policy line was interpreted as being an attempt to develop economic and political relations. It did not mention exporting Islamic revolution or developing complicated relations to struggle against the enemies of Islam, as had been declared in the past. However, Turkish policies were seen as attempting to decrease Russian influence in the area and facilitate the access of the United States and other Western powers.

Although Russia put a priority on relations with the West in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the new international environment forced Russia to change its position continually. This change was visible in the different policy lines of the succeeding foreign ministers of this era. The earlier expectations that the West would help Russia recover from the collapse of the Soviet Union were not met. The result was disappointment and Russia’s turn toward establishing spheres of influence in the former Soviet republics south and east with a more nationalist orientation. In November 1993, Russian policymakers accepted a new national security concept and underlined the strategic importance of the Caucasus and central Asia as part of their ‘near abroad.’

From the Russian point of view, the best option—in view of the end of bipolarity in the international order—was the emergence of a multipolar world. However, the emerging international order was a unipolar one, led by US military supremacy. The fundamental and rapid changes in Russian foreign and security policies were mainly due to this new international context. Russia adopted a more pragmatic and multidimensional policy line to satisfy regional and international interests, under the pressure of the changing world order and perceptions of threat. In addition, in its former territories, Russia was faced with threats of ethnic clashes, separatism,
nationalist extremism and terrorism. There was a sense of encirclement with the crises and civil wars in Abkhazia, south Ossetia, Pridnyester, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabagh and Afghanistan. In such a regional and international environment, Iran’s importance increased in the eyes of Russian policymakers.

In late 1993, the convergence of the interests of the offended Russia and the angry Iran vis-à-vis the West led to a rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran. Iran was the only possible ally against US expansion in the Middle East, the Caucasus and central Asia. Iran accepted Russia’s concerns about its ‘near abroad’ and need to have an upper hand in this area. Russian attempts to counter the United States through a multipolar world order were not producing results. This compelled Russia to pay more attention to regional policy to preserve its position—at least in its near environs. The NATO action against Serbia was symbolically important, since it substantially challenged the pro-Western inclinations in the Russian administration. The Russian foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, turned the country’s focus toward Eurasia, and Iran became an important ally in the new Russian foreign policy orientation. However, this policy line did not produce results for some time, and the United States continued to expand its sphere of influence in the Russian ‘near abroad.’ Meanwhile, Russia was also facing a severe economic crisis at home.

After Yeltsin’s resignation, the new president, Vladimir Putin, made substantial changes in the country’s foreign policy and renewed the ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ in June 2000. Putin stated, ‘Russia will cooperate with every possible partner if there is nothing against our interests.’ This statement was the sign of a new foreign policy line. As stated by Russian Foreign Minister Ivan Ivanov, Russian diplomacy was in a state of complete psychological restoration in this era. Putin was adopting a multidimensional policy line focusing on both ‘East’ and ‘West’ with a pragmatic attitude that prioritized economic and security interests.

The difference between the new ‘Foreign Policy Concept’ and the 1993 one was the bold and clear definition of Russian interests and the decision to defend these interests by every means. The discourses about partnership with Western countries and cooperation for a more secure international order disappeared. Instead, the need for multipolarity and the danger of rising American military unipolarity were highlighted. This tough attitude to US policies brought Russia and Iran closer in this era. In short, Iran and Russia were rationally responding to the US hegemonic expansion and isolationist policies toward them. Indeed, the US attempts to isolate Iran, the Iraqi war, and the US military presence in the region are the major factors that have shaped Iranian foreign policy. The Iranian response to the US encirclement was collaboration with Russia. In this relationship, Russia opposed the US attempts to contain Iran, and Iran played the loyal ally role in the region, in particular supporting the Russian desire to keep the ‘near abroad’ under its sphere of influence. Regional and international developments, such as NATO’s eastward expansion, the struggle over Caspian oil and natural gas reserves, and the establishment of US military bases, supported this rapprochement in the eyes of policymakers in both Moscow and Tehran.

Russian–Iranian relations under Putin’s rule resulted in close ties, and Iran supported Russian positions in regional and international issues. Russia felt Iranian solidarity could be taken for granted in many domestic and international issues. In response, Russia continually objected to the sanctions against Iran and advocated
Iranian interests in international forums. The close relations also led to the improvement of economic ties between the two countries. Although Iran represented only a small portion of Russian foreign trade, the political relations created an impetus to improve trade relations.\textsuperscript{20}

The arms trade is an important component of Russian–Iranian relations. The Russian military industry is one of the strongest in the world. The Russian government carefully manages the arms trade in a way to contribute to its notion of a multipolar international order. In late 2001, Putin stated in a conference on arms sales, ‘If I am not wrong, we are cooperating with 60 countries. However, if we look at the percentages, our relations with two or three countries are so important that we cannot compare them with the rest of the 60 countries.’ \textsuperscript{21} There is no doubt that China and India are the most important partners, but Iran is the third most important country. Nuclear cooperation is another important area and will be discussed in the next section.

Nuclear issues

Western countries, led by the United States, had helped the Iranian nuclear program and facilitated the export of nuclear technology to Iran under the regime of the Shah. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the US government withdrew its support for the nuclear program. The Iran–Iraq war, combined with escalating tension with the United States, paved the way for new ideas, among various security circles, of obtaining nuclear weapons to defend Iran in a hostile regional and international environment. The early revolutionary political elite in Iran conceived the world order in terms of the rivalry between nuclear powers, and this perception persists to some extent, despite the counter-arguments that nuclear weapons are unacceptable in Islamic terms. Whether for peaceful nuclear purposes or for producing nuclear weapons, there is a desperate need for external support to pursue any nuclear program. Iran's most reliable, and for a long time its only, partner has been the Russian Federation.

Several countries have contributed to the Iranian nuclear program since its inception, including Argentina, Belgium, the UK, Germany, India, Italy, China, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, the United States, France, South Africa and North Korea.\textsuperscript{22} The German company Siemens began to construct two nuclear reactors at the Bushehr nuclear plant in the 1970s. This investment amounted to DM8 bn. However, Siemens did not complete this project, and the Iranian government approached Germany but failed to persuade the German government to finish the job. China and Brazil also refused Iranian offers to cooperate on nuclear issues.\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, there was not much chance of finding a partner on the nuclear issue, so in due course Iran chose Russia—to a considerable extent by necessity. Iranian–Russian talks on completing the Bushehr nuclear plant began in 1990. The nuclear contract added a strategic value to the relations between Russia and Iran and contributed to further improvements in bilateral relations. Russia has been the sole partner of Iran on the nuclear issue since 1995. These years also witnessed increasing suspicion, particularly in Western circles, of Iran's acquiring nuclear know-how through cooperation. US policymakers and those of a few other Western countries expressed their concern over Iran's nuclear intentions. The United States and other Western countries frequently pointed out in their statements and documents that the Iranian
nuclear program is the result of an agreement on peaceful use of nuclear energy between Russia and Iran.\textsuperscript{24}

The international pressure on Russia did not prevent the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, 92\% of which was completed by 2006.\textsuperscript{25} The Bushehr construction created job opportunities for 300 Russian firms and 20,000 people. There are 1,500 active workers involved in this construction.\textsuperscript{26} Russia wants to have a bigger share in the newly emerging demand for nuclear energy and aims to prove its capabilities in the Iranian case. Therefore, the Iranian experience is not only an issue of political prestige but also an opportunity for Russia to emerge as a reliable service provider and to enter the global nuclear energy market.\textsuperscript{27}

The Russian government has expressed its concern that there are a double standard and pursuit of economic interest behind the political storm over the Iranian nuclear power plant. The Russian foreign minister, I.S. Ivanov, pointed out that the Russian government is in favor of Iranian transparency on the nuclear issue. In his view, it was a Russian incentive that made Iran provide information on the nuclear issue, sign additional protocols with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and stop the uranium-enrichment program. For this reason, Russia sees no reason to worry about the Iranian nuclear program. Russian cooperation with Iran is limited to the Bushehr plant and is in conformity with the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. The IAEA paid 100 visits to Bushehr and did not identify any problems.\textsuperscript{28} On 9 November 2003, the secretary of the Iranian National Security Council, Hassan Rohani, visited Moscow and had a meeting with President Putin. During this visit, Rohani declared the Iranian willingness to sign an additional NPT protocol. He also made it clear that the uranium-enrichment program would be frozen for some time. This symbolic gesture was the result of Russia’s constructive engagement on the nuclear issue. Iran stepped back and showed that it did not want to escalate tensions over this issue.\textsuperscript{29}

Later in November 2003, Ivanov added that he knew of no country that wanted Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. He restated the Russian position as advising Iran to be open and transparent on the nuclear issue and follow the dictates of the NPT regime and IAEA supervision. He confidently added that Russia would be one of the most reliable partners in nuclear deals and would prove its reliability in the Iranian case.\textsuperscript{30} This additional protocol was signed in December 2003 and granted the IAEA authority to send controllers to Iranian nuclear facilities without prior notice. The Russian government was following a double-track policy. While continuing to build the Bushehr nuclear plant, Russia also sent signals to Iran and the international community that it was complying with international rules and standards. The Russian government further noted that it had made Iran adhere to the NPT regime as a precondition to continuance of the Bushehr project. However, this protocol has not been ratified by Iran due to an apparent reluctance to suspend the programs of uranium enrichment and fuel cycle technology.

Russia brought new ideas to the fore to end the impasse in the nuclear negotiations. Moscow put forward an offer to produce enriched uranium in Russia and provide storage and reprocessing facilities after the nuclear fuel’s use in the Iranian nuclear power plants. Moscow aimed to block Iran from acquiring enrichment technology and accumulating a quantity of weapons-grade nuclear material. Russia would establish a joint facility in its homeland, and, as a result, the Iranians would not be able to attain key nuclear technology. This was a constructive
diplomatic move, and the United States and the EU expressed its positive response to the Russian offer. However, on 26 December 2005, the Iranian government rejected this offer and stated that it would produce enriched uranium in Iran.  

Russia changed its soft attitude to some extent toward Iran after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that he was praying for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s death soon. He continually put forward such ideas as the destruction of Israel and its removal from the map, escalating tensions in the international arena. Russia condemned this statement and Foreign Minister Lavrov talked about sending an Iranian nuclear file to the UN Security Council on 12 January 2006. For Iran, this was an unexpected move. However, the developments that followed showed that Russia’s real intention was not to bring the issue to the Security Council. According to Aleksey Malashenko, ‘Russia will not end its cooperation with Iran. Moscow plays a careful political game in raising its voice against Iran.’ Recep Safarov, director of the Iranian Studies Center, argued, ‘Russia’s stance is not a game. It wants the Iranian administration to make up their minds.’ On 2 February 2006, the IAEA, by a majority vote, decided to send the EU-3 draft to the Security Council. Russia supported this decision.

Russia’s offer to produce enriched uranium in Russia for Iran led to discussions and the emergence of different positions in Iran. For example, the Iranian political scientist Ali Reza Daveri argued that Russia is no longer a reliable partner, and he considered Russian intervention to be like that of China’s insincere offers, which include common elements with the US and European demands. He favored a change of tone in Iran’s diplomacy with Russia. An Iranian member of parliament, Hasmatolla Falyahatpishe, argued that Iran should follow nuclear diplomacy in an independent manner, as it is useless to trust Russia as a mediator in the negotiations. This period was also an era of increasing pressure on Russia on the nuclear issue due to America’s critical stance, which emerged in the context of the G8 meeting in 2006 and Russia’s admission to the World Trade Organization. Russia played the Iranian nuclear card carefully and attempted to persuade the international community that it follows a responsible policy on the nuclear issue.

The 5+1 group, which consists of the Security Council’s five permanent members and Germany, discussed the Iranian file in Vienna in June 2006. The 5+1 package included possible sanctions if Iran did not agree to the cessation of its uranium-enrichment activities. Russia’s contribution in preparing this plan was considerable, and Moscow reinstated its demand that Iran ease its defiance of the international community and put the negotiations back onto the right track. Foreign Minister Lavrov expressed his hope that Iran would take this 5+1 group offer seriously and start negotiations under the terms of international regulations. According to Lavrov, this new offer was a positive one and underlined the importance of the uranium-enrichment program in the whole nuclear issue. He added that there would be no use of force against Iran in any way. If Iran accepted the deal, there would no longer be a Security Council option for this case. In other words, the Russian government was conveying a message to its closest partner in the Middle East that this time there was not much room for maneuver.

On 31 July 2006, by a vote of 14 in favor to one against, the Security Council passed Resolution 1696, which asked Iran to suspend all uranium-enrichment activities by 31 August. Russia and China surprised Iran by voting in favor of the resolution. Russia and China could be persuaded to vote in favor since the resolution
did not mention any automatic sanctions and underlined that further decisions in case of noncompliance by Iran would be taken in a subsequent meeting. Iran did not comply with the resolution and continued its nuclear program. On 2 December 2006, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that Russia opposed punishment of Iran but would not oppose sanctions aimed at preventing the import of nuclear materials and technologies into Iran. The Security Council, on 23 December 2006, unanimously adopted Resolution 1737, which included the imposition of a series of sanctions against Iran.

The fact that the light-water power reactor being constructed by a Russian contractor in the city of Bushehr remained exempt from the restrictions played a significant role in Russia's affirmative vote. In this way, Russia protected its economic interests and signaled to Iran that it may get tougher if Iran does not comply with the IAEA's requirements. From the perspective of Iran, the decision was significant in demonstrating that Russian and/or Chinese vetoes in the Security Council are no longer guaranteed. However, Iran did not suspend its activities within the 60-day period stipulated by Resolution 1737. On 22 February 2007, in a report submitted to the Security Council, the IAEA's director, Muhammad al-Baradai, announced that Iran had actually improved its nuclear program in the meantime.

Russia and Iran have also had a dispute over the payment for their nuclear cooperation. On 19 February 2007, the Russian company Rosatom announced that Iran had failed to pay for the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr and had not made any payment in the past month. Iran rejected the allegations. Rosatom repeated its claim on 5 March 2007 and announced that Iran had not made any payment in the past 21 days. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Iran, however, stated that there was no problem with Russia regarding the reactor in Bushehr. On 24 March 2007, the Security Council unanimously voted for resolution 1747 to toughen the sanctions against Iran. Iran started to pay Russia again on 26 March 2007. Russia then announced that the nuclear reactor would not be constructed within the scheduled time. It is not credible that Iran cannot make the payments. Iran actually benefits from stopping the construction due to payment delays. In this way, Russia does not complete the project and the two sides have to stay at the table. This situation benefits both sides, particularly Iran.

**Limits of the strategic alliance**

Though Iran is quite a difficult and capricious ally for Russia, both states sometimes describe each other as strategic allies. For instance, the head of the defense commission for the lower house of the Russian Duma (parliament), A.I. Nikolayev, said, ‘Iran is a strategic ally for Russia in its south.’ Similarly, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said, ‘Cooperation with Moscow is a strategic preference of Iran.’ The attribution of strategic alliance is an argument employed very often, in particular by Iran. A strategic alliance is a kind of broad security relationship that may involve, among other things, cooperation for the attainment of common goals on matters of military assistance, defense industries, joint military maneuvers, intelligence sharing, deployment of military divisions in partner countries, and military training. For the establishment of a strategic alliance between any two states, there must be consensus and cooperation with respect to their worldviews, political regimes, long-term interests and universal values.
The international prospects for Moscow's support of Tehran are limited. There is no agreement between Russia and Iran for common defense and military cooperation in the event of an attack. If the United States and its allies initiated a military intervention in Iran, Russian assistance would amount to little more than calling for mediation by international organizations, such as the UN. Another indication of close relationships between states is the exchange of official visits by high-ranking statesmen. In this way, states strengthen their confidence in their relationships. However, the traffic of high-ranking official visits between Russia and Iran is not at such high levels. Presidential level visits between the two states have thus far been limited to Khatami's visit to Moscow in 2001 and Putin's visit to Tehran in 2007. The latter visit came after Putin had visited some other leading states of the Islamic world such as Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Turkey.

In view of these limitations, it is really very difficult to consider Russia and Iran strategic allies. As we mentioned before, one of the indicators of Iran's status in Russia's foreign policy is 'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,' which was adapted in 2000. While the necessity for the development of relations with various states is explained in detail, only one sentence mentions Iran: "It is important to develop further relations with Iran."46

When we take a close look, the approaches of the two countries to the concept of strategic alliance are quite dissimilar. Tehran views its relations with Russia through an international politics prism and then reduces it to the level of bilateral relations. Moscow, on the other hand, signifies bilateral relations, but still does not consider Iran a serious partner in the international arena. Moscow's current pragmatic approach will continue as long as its relations with Tehran do not conflict with its other interests and its process of international integration. Besides, according to Mahdi Sanai, a member of the Council of Sciences of Tehran University, Russia placed a ceiling on its cooperation with Iran when it limited Iran's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to mere observer status and denied it the advantages of full membership.47

In retrospect, Iran has been very successful in exploiting the conflicts among great powers. Iranian policies during the power struggles between the Ottomans and Russia, Russia and Britain, and the United States and the Soviet Union offer plenty of examples in this respect. Intermingled with considerations of realpolitik, pragmatism and national interest, such Iranian policies have come to be shaped in relation to the alleged power struggle between the United States and the EU, on one side, and Russia and China, on the other side, in the presence of the power vacuum emerging after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In evaluating Russian–Iranian relations, we must always keep in mind the Iranian diplomatic preference to exploit power struggles. Though the actors of this power struggle may change in the future, Iran's relevant policy is not likely to change.

In both Iran and Russia, different parties oppose or support cooperation. While the conservatives in Russia, who constitute the majority and keep the power in their hands, argue that Russia must support Iran because Iranian relations with the United States are at a low ebb, the liberals’ approach to Iran is rather negative and strongly against Russia’s closer relations with Iran. Those in Russia who oppose close ties with Iran indicate that Iranian ties are likely to create serious difficulties for Russia in the international arena. They also argue that in case of a recovery in Iran’s relations with the United States, Iran will cease to consider Russia a political and
commercial partner. Similarly, some parties in Iran do not regard Russia as a reliable partner in the long run. They very often cite the infamous role of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union in Iranian history. In their view, Russia is using Iran as a lever in its relations with the EU and the United States.\textsuperscript{48}

Therefore, whenever Russia displays a negative attitude to Iran vis-à-vis its nuclear program, it is very harshly condemned by Tehran, as an unexpected response from a strategic ally. When Russia supported the IAEA’s decision of 4 February 2006, the Iranians were greatly surprised. C. Cihangirzade, a member of the Iranian parliament’s Commission for Foreign Policy and National Security, made a very interesting comment: ‘Iran has experienced very dire consequences due to its relations with Russia in recent years and therefore in the scenario written by the West for Iran, Russia is given the role of the good cop.’\textsuperscript{49} Iran has also condemned Russia’s failure to veto Security Council decisions as well as its complaints about financial problems in the Bushehr plant. On 13 March 2007, the Iranian parliament released a very harsh comment: ‘Moscow has never been a reliable partner, nor will it be one in the future.’\textsuperscript{50}

A question comes to mind here on the limits of proximity between Russia and Iran. President Putin gave the answer when he said, ‘Here we have a unique situation that necessitates paying attention to the concerns of world public opinion on the question of security. As a member of the UN Security Council and the G8 governments, we have to consider these concerns, but I reiterate that we must not also forget our national interests.’\textsuperscript{51} In other words, he respects international law as long as Russia’s national interests are not harmed. An explanation by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia’s foreign policy also supports this standpoint: ‘The future of bilateral relations in various areas between Russia and Iran depends on the developments around Iran’s nuclear program to a large extent. It is necessary to carry out a very prudent policy with Iran regarding our national interests, but we should also eschew the renunciation of the regime on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.’\textsuperscript{52}

As a permanent member of the Security Council but also having broad political-commercial relations with Iran, will Russia support UN sanctions or will it lean toward its economic interests if Iran disregards the bans and develops its program to produce nuclear weapons? Secretary of State Ivanov, in January 2006, answered this question when he said that Russia has a list of priorities in which the prevention of nuclear weapons is at the top. As a member of the world community and the Security Council, Russia could not simply disregard these threats.\textsuperscript{53}

Toward the end of 2006, the United States announced that it would install a missile defense system in Eastern Europe. The installations were intended to protect Europe against missile attacks by present or prospective nuclear powers such as Iran and North Korea. Russia argued to Europe and the United States that Iran does not represent such a serious threat that the United States must install missile systems close to Russia’s borders. Russia very often points out the necessity of resolving international problems within the framework of the UN Charter and the provisions of international law. In his speech during the security conference in Munich in February 2007, Putin emphasized that the UN Charter must be the only guide for decisions concerning the use of military power as the last resort, and that neither NATO nor the EU can operate as a decision-making body on this matter.\textsuperscript{54}
In the words of Putin, Russia is acting in cooperation with Iran so that it does not feel cornered and surrounded by an inimical circle, and it knows that it possesses channels of communication and reliable friends. How does Iran regard this situation? In his influential Munich speech, which drew much reaction, Putin said, 'We wish that Iran understands us and hears our signals.' Some wondered how realistic he was being. In his view, Iran did not understand Russia and insisted on disregarding any overt or covert signal. By voting affirmatively on UN Security Council Resolutions 1696, 1737 and 1747, Russia demonstrated that its tolerance is limited and that there are some 'red lines' in its relations with Iran. However, determined to maintain its nuclear program at all costs—although the criticisms demonstrate policymakers' frustration—the Iranian government was to a certain degree prepared for this situation. The press conference on 4 October 2005 by Iran’s ambassador to Tajikistan, Nasir Sarmadi, showed this readiness, in his statement: ‘Despite the currently satisfying level of relations between Iran and Russia, the Islamic Republic is not so naively optimistic for Russia’s constant support for the interests of Iran.’

In December 2007, the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) noted that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in autumn 2003, and was sufficiently confident that it had not restarted this program in 2007. IAEA Director Muhammad al-Baradai commented that the NIE findings were consistent with the IAEA assessment and should be utilized in finding a resolution of the contention over the Iranian nuclear issue. This development provided some relief to Russia’s approach to the Iranian nuclear issue. Russian policymakers were quick to exploit the shifting international atmosphere regarding Iran’s nuclear issue and began shipping nuclear fuel to the Bushehr power plant in Iran. US President George Bush pointed out that he supported the Russian action since it would encourage Iran to abandon its uranium-enrichment program. However, this Russian policy has been considered another signal of ‘forced cooperation’ from the Iranian side, since Russia is the only country assisting Iranian nuclear activities, and the Russian position is tied to the level of tension in the global community on the nuclear issue. Russia supported critical UN decisions on Iran’s nuclear issue when the global community united against Iran and started to ship nuclear fuel to Iran after tension relaxed on the issue following the NIE and IAEA reports. Mohammad Kiarashi, Iran’s former envoy to the IAEA, pointed out the suspicious character of the partnership with Russia, arguing that ‘the process of nuclear negotiations between Iran and Russia clearly shows that Iran must become self-sufficient in the production of nuclear fuel. Of course, the best justification is Russia’s behavior in delivering fuel to the [Bushehr] plant.’

Conclusion

In light of the discussion in this article, we may characterize Russian–Iranian relations as a ‘suspicious partnership’ rather than a ‘strategic alliance.’ The two countries try to maintain their bilateral relations, despite many difficulties as well as motivations of strategic calculation and reciprocal suspicion. Both states perceive that regional and international circumstances have forced them to establish close relations, while watching each other with suspicion. This is reminiscent of the moods of two experienced traders who consider trade acceptable because of common
interests but also carry out their trade relations in a prudent way by keeping their distance. Though it appears to be a beneficial partnership in lieu of the uniting of the powers, it is quite vulnerable owing to the nature of their mutual relations. The major motivation behind Russian–Iranian relations is the imposition of US unipolarity and the US desire to pursue hegemonic policies.

As it attempts to establish a multipolar world system, the most important leverage of Russia is to act in tandem with world public opinion within the framework of the UN Charter and international law. Russian options are limited in types of postures and policies. Therefore, as a permanent member of the Security Council, Russia can make concessions to Iran in its relations and undertake some responsibilities. If Russian concerns and complaints are satisfied, there will be no more need to bear any cost for Iran. In addition, as long as the imposition of a unipolar system continues, Russia will preserve its relations with Iran. Due to its position in the Security Council, it can protract the US-led process to impose military sanctions on Iran. The only state that will benefit from this disagreement will be Iran, by gradually developing its nuclear program. The United States is contributing indirectly to the development of the relations between Iran and Russia. In such an international conjuncture, the relations between Russia and Iran, although not in the form of a strategic alliance, will continue with ups and downs under the tides of strategic calculations and reciprocal suspicions.

Notes

5. A.Y. Umnov, Iran: Views for Moscow (in Russian) (Moscow: 1996), 256.
7. V.K. Egorov, Russia and Turkey: Axis of Opposites (in Russian) (Moscow, 2000), 323.
8. Turkey Between Asia and Europe: Results of Europeanization at the End of the Twentieth Century (in Russian) (Moscow: 2001), 413.
34. Ibid.
37. See www.regnum.ru.
42. The text of the resolution is available at www.pircenter.org/data/resources/Resolution_1737.pdf.
44. For the text of the resolution, see www.pircenter.org/data/resources/07.03.24_UN_SC_Rsolution_1747.pdf.
46. ‘Konseptsiya Vneshney Politiki RF 2000.’
47. Sanai, 121.
48. Interview with Mohammed Hafezian, Professor of Political Science, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, December 17, 2007.
49. Rozov, ‘Rossiyskoe predlojenie.’
50. Khronologiya Rossiysko–Iranovskovo, p. 29.
52. ITAR-TASS, March 27, 2007.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.

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