



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Russia and Iran: Foes and Friends

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Russia and Iran have been geopolitical rivals for centuries – but over the past couple of years, the Moscow-Tehran axis has grown exponentially. This creates major headaches for the US and other western powers that are concerned about how far this cooperation could go. The two powers share common interests in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, but are wary of one another’s growing influence in their own backyards.

Iran was a regional power for centuries. Powerful Iranian dynasties, such as the Achaemenids and the Sasanians in the ancient period and the Safavids and the Kajars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, aspired to take a major role in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and elsewhere. In the decades following the Cold War, however, when western countries imposed sanctions on Tehran’s nuclear program, Iran was constrained from projecting its economic and political influence abroad.

However, with sanctions officially lifted in early 2016 and the Trump administration’s refusal (despite its rhetoric) to scrap the Iran nuclear deal for the time being, Tehran now sees avenues for projecting its economic and political clout from the Mediterranean to the South Caucasus and elsewhere.

The hitch for Iran is that its geopolitical ambitions overlap those of Russia. Moscow has its own imperatives in the South Caucasus, where it struggles to keep the EU and the US at bay; and in Syria, where the Europeans and the Americans likewise have interests of their own.

The logic behind the current cooperation between Russia and Iran ranges from economic and military to purely geopolitical. For instance, both want to initiate or increase their oil and gas exports to the European market. Iran is particularly

well positioned to take a share of the European gas market as the EU is worried about Russian predominance in that area. Iranian gas could be a very good tool with which to assuage European fears, but to export its gas, Tehran will need the Black Sea ports, such as Batumi and Poti in Georgia, and has also expressed its willingness to use the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline.

As a result, Iran has made progress in establishing itself on the Black Sea coast. In late 2016 it was agreed that Tehran would construct oil reproduction facilities near Georgia's Black Sea city of Supsa on approximately 1.2 square kilometers.

There nevertheless remain significant constraints facing Iran in the South Caucasus as Russia and Turkey are well represented, both militarily and economically, in the region. Moscow, for example, has successfully obstructed all Iranian attempts to establish independent pipelines and railways to Armenia and Georgia.

Another area of involvement for Iran in the Russian sphere of influence could be the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the early 1990s, the Iranian government made several unsuccessful attempts to mediate the conflict. Since both Armenia and Azerbaijan border on Iran, it is natural to expect Tehran to try to play a bigger role here. However, Russia, which is still the dominant power in the conflict resolution process, will oppose any Iranian initiatives that threaten to diminish Moscow's role.

### **Despite rivalry, Iran and Russia can also cooperate**

Although from a geopolitical standpoint Russo-Iranian relations are not devoid of difficulties, there are grounds for cooperation. The map of Eurasia provides a glimpse into the rationale behind the Russian political elite's desire for closer cooperation with Tehran.

Russian political thinkers of the 1990s largely believed that Iran and Turkey should have been the pillars of future Russian influence in the Middle East. The so-called Eurasianists – those who believe Russia is in neither Europe nor Asia – felt that Moscow needed Tehran and Ankara if it were to compete successfully with western powers. Russian President Vladimir Putin put those notions aside officially, but not in practice. It is in Russia's perennial interest to keep Iran at least neutral, as it was during both the Romanov period and the Soviet empire.

It is in both countries' interests to cooperate in obstructing western military encroachment in the South Caucasus and the Middle East. Both consider the evolving US grand strategy in the Eurasian landmass detrimental to their

respective geopolitical imperatives. To Russia, the US violates the post-Cold War order by ramping up military pressure on Moscow in the former Soviet space. To Iran, the US is trying to limit its nuclear ambitions as well as its geopolitical outreach throughout the Middle East.

This common fear of the US could be considered one of the drivers behind the close Russo-Iranian cooperation. Washington did, after all, recently unveil a new national strategy document enumerating major problems across Eurasia – and identified Moscow and Tehran as most problematic for its interests.

One theater of Russo-Iranian cooperation is in Syria, where both are interested in stopping western (primarily American) influence. Much has been written on the military and economic measures Moscow and Tehran have been implementing in Syria for years – but differences tend to appear between wartime allies after hostilities end. Indeed, there have already been hints in the media about disagreements between Russia and Iran on methods, aims, and results of the war in Syria.

Although Moscow and Tehran cooperate, they loathe each other's geopolitical ambitions. Iran has very nearly solidified its land reach to the Mediterranean, and Moscow could well be worried that a strong Iran will be less inclined to follow the Russian lead.

Despite the fact that Russia and Iran have political differences, geopolitical forces continue to be strong enough to keep them cooperating for the time being.

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