



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Tehran-Moscow Cooperation Goes Beyond Syria

by Emil Avdaliani

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,072, January 24, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Syrian theater exemplifies Russo-Iranian cooperation, but there are other theaters in which Moscow and Tehran have cooperated for years. Their partnership in the South Caucasus and the energy-rich Caspian Sea area are examples of this trend. Taken together, these instances of Russo-Iranian cooperation fit into the pattern of “geopolitical chaos” across Eurasia in which Moscow and Tehran, as well as other regional powers, work together to challenge US dominance.

Iran and Russia have long been wary of one another’s geopolitical ambitions. Numerous wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century over domination in the South Caucasus, and Russian influence in northern Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made deep cooperation between the two powers almost unthinkable. However, developments in Syria since 2011 and US pressure on Moscow and Tehran have made such a partnership possible.

In Syria, both Russia and Iran are interested in stopping Western (primarily American) influence from gaining much of a foothold. But while this arena of cooperation has become a symbol of the alignment of Moscow-Tehran geopolitics, it overshadows other trends in Iranian-Russian relations – namely, a strong partnership in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea.

The focal point of cooperation is the nascent north-south transit corridor between Iran and Russia, which passes through Azerbaijan. The three countries are already somewhat connected via rail links, and there is a notion that Russia’s Baltic ports and the Persian Gulf could one day enjoy efficient connections. Tehran and Moscow see Azerbaijan as a vital component in advancing north-south trade and energy corridors in the South Caucasus, and they work together to block Western-led infrastructure projects. Prospective north-south corridors rival the east-west ones promoted by Western countries, and perhaps also the

east-west Belt and Road Initiative promoted by China. Another common interest is to avoid any foreign military presence in the region, particularly in Georgia.

A further area of Iranian involvement could be the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, although that is less likely. Tehran tried and failed to mediate the conflict in the early 1990s, and Russia, the dominant power in the conflict resolution process, would likely be strongly opposed to any Iranian meddling that might diminish Moscow's role.

From the Iranian perspective, the growing military cooperation between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan could pose a problem similar to that posed by the expansion of NATO, primarily in Georgia. Russian thinking could well align with Iranian thinking here, as both fear Western military encroachment in their spheres of influence. Both also loathe Turkish influence in the region. The Russians are more predominant than the Turks in terms of military presence, but in trade and investments, Ankara is unquestionably at the forefront. True, there have been positive developments in Azerbaijan-Tehran relations recently, but it is still Ankara that enjoys strong relations with Baku and supports it in the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

While the lifting of sanctions against Iran in 2015 helped it to assert itself in the South Caucasus both economically and politically, Tehran has continued to face major challenges there from both Russia and Turkey. Armenia-Russia relations are too ingrained in terms of military and economic cooperation for Iran to insert itself effectively. Elsewhere, Turkish economic and political influence still overshadows Iran's ambitions. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia will use all its tools to block Tehran's greater involvement.

Further east from the South Caucasus, the Russians and the Iranians cooperate in the Caspian region. The Caspian Sea has long been a site of geopolitical contention among the five littoral states (Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Russia). In 2018, the Convention agreed upon by the Caspian states clarified the right of all five to lay underwater pipelines, subject to the agreement of those states through whose sectors the pipelines or cables would pass. Although these were the agreed terms, laying underwater pipelines goes against Russian and Iranian geopolitical interests as it would allow Central Asian states (primarily Turkmenistan) to export their large gas resources to Europe. Both Iran and Russia want to do this themselves, although the latter has clearly had the upper hand since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **International Context**

There is an interesting international context to the strengthening of Iranian-Russian cooperation in general and in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea

in particular. Washington restored sanctions on Tehran in 2018, strengthening the Russian and Iranian view that the US is against the rise of regional powers across the Eurasian landmass. Russia has had sanctions regimes imposed on it by Washington as well, and there is a shared understanding in Moscow and Tehran that the US is a geopolitical enemy.

This fits into the geopolitical “chaos” theory, or what some prefer to call the strategic realignment of multiple power brokers on the Eurasian landmass. On the surface, it is arguable that it is easier for the US to manage a divided Eurasia now that there are numerous regional powers competing with one other rather than the monolith that characterized the more stable era of the Cold War. However, the unpredictability of that chaos represents a marked break from what the West had to cope with in previous decades. In the more predictable Cold War era, geopolitics were important, but were hidden under democratic and idealistic premises.

In modern Eurasia, there is a clear shift towards a new, more untenable world order. Russo-Iranian cooperation in Syria is not merely an alliance of convenience. It is only one element of a much broader cooperation that spans other regions of the Eurasian landmass.

*Emil Avdaliani teaches history and international relations at Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. He has worked for various international consulting companies and currently publishes articles on military and political developments across the former Soviet space.*