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Iran and Russia after the U.S. Withdrawal from the JCPOA; Opportunities and Obstacles to Cooperation



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Preface

Last year, we held a session in association with the Gorchakov Foundations with the two main questions: to what extent the JCPOA may be affecting on the two countries' relations? And also is it possible that the both countries' cooperation on the Syrian crisis applicable to other areas such as Afghanistan? In this session we faced with a new factor that is the US exit from the JCPOA and its effect on Iran's foreign policy with the world especially with Russia and China. Many leading experts from the both sides attended in the seminar and reaching very well concluding Remarks that could be summarized as follows:

- 1- Alas the US exit from the JCPOA, it would be mentioned as a proper context for two countries for setting an agenda and developing a strategy for the future in the wide range from the bilateral to the regional and also to the internationally. Pursuing to devise a strategy would be including from the economic to the military and security too.
- 2- The relations of two countries in the Syrian crisis could be applicable as exemplar cooperative endeavors in the other issues and other regions such as the Central Asia and South Caucasus, ranging from the drug traffic to Islamic Fundamentalism too.
- 3- Russia at the first stage could be doing as a good moderator in the Middle East between the Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia and so on. It could be stretching to the international level between the US-Russia negotiations and also in the international organization level.
- 4- Beside of Russia, working with the EU, China on the preserving the JCPOA and striving to political peaceful settlements in the Syria crisis could be as a new initiate for not only solving the regional issues but also it is a model for promoting interregional cooperation in the globalized world.

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Geopolitical Necessities of Expanding Iran-Russia Relations

Elaheh Koolae¹

Iran's relations with Russia have been one of the most important aspects of its foreign policy. Various developments have helped to further strengthen security and political ties between the two countries. The history of relations between Iran and the Soviet Union, and especially, the impact of the international system on their relations are advantageous. These relations were affected by the third player role. We can see the reconstruction of these behavior patterns in the past two decades with some change occurring in the relations between the two states. Therefore, historical experience helps understanding the potentials in the development of relations. Tehran and Moscow's cooperation in Central Asia and the South Caucasus and the Middle East, help to prevent instability and changes of the balance of power in these regions. Their cooperation in support of Northern Alliance in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and to end Civil War in Tajikistan can be mentioned. Social and cultural issues are suitable ground in order to help Tehran forge a new sort of cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Russians have constantly tried to take advantage of tense relations between Iran and the West. Recent developments in the region have highlighted the importance of relations between the two countries. One of these developments is extensive activities by radical Islamist forces in Syria. Another factor is the presence in Syria of warriors from Chechnya and other autonomous republics of Russia in the Caucasus. One of the most important aspects of regional developments has been the JCPOA that has further underlined the importance of ties between Tehran and Moscow. Measures to implement the Geneva agreement and the successful foreign policy approach of new Iranian administration to building confidence with the international community will have direct effects on its relation with Russia. Iran will be able to engage in bargaining at different levels and in a better position in order to guarantee its interests. Economic relations between Iran and Russian Federation had been offered with many new opportunities in post-JCPOA era. It could create a new potential in the region's geopolitical equations and Iran should take advantage of this situation. One of the impacts of new condition is regional opposition, especially from Saudi Arabia. Riyadh's main concern was that the improved Iran-West relations could increase Iran's regional role.

The geopolitics of the JCPOA had even changed the equation of Iran's relations with Russia, China, India, Japan and other economic powers in favour of Iran. The developing economic, political and military links binding Iran, China and Russia as an emerging Golden Triangle in Eurasia. It seems to be US geopolitical strategy in a prospective Trump

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Administration to distance Washington from both Iran and China. This will have considerable impacts, for Syria and Iraq. China and Russia are agreeing to coordinate in One Belt, One Road project to link markets of Central Asia, Iran—and potentially Turkey—to a coherent high-speed rail and maritime port network. Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran agree to speed up talks on a North-South transport corridor that partly would go along western coast of the Caspian Sea from Russia to Iran through Azerbaijan. This corridor will reduce the time of cargo transport from India to Central Asia and Russia. This Corridor is expected to play a different role in boosting economies of Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East and South Asia.

After the Arab Spring and the crisis in Syria since 2012, Iran-Russia cooperation to secure the Syrian government has progressed. Diplomatic, intelligence, technical and operational cooperation between the two states to contain the Syrian crisis has been going on in the past five years. This cooperation is vital and effective for their interests and for stability and security in the Middle East. Russia seeks to maintain a “geopolitical positioning point” in Syria while Iran sees Syria as a pillar of resistance against Israel; a viewpoint which is not held by Moscow. The downfall of Libya’s former dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, escalation of tensions in Syria and especially, the breakout of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Russians officials at the Kremlin have reached a new geopolitical understanding of the nature of the West’s aggressive policy in the region. Iran viewed Hezbollah as a deterrent force and a constant potential threat to Israel’s security. Syria, as an anti-Israel, anti-American strategic ally of Iran, served as a vital corridor connecting Damascus to Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. Overthrow of the Iraqi dictator, in 2003, paved the way for the formation of the Iran-led "axis of resistance" which extends from Iran to Lebanon and passes unobstructed through Iraq and Syria.

Of special importance was the intensification of confrontation between Iran and the West in various areas which provided Russia with unprecedented opportunities and Moscow took extensive advantages of those opportunities. At present, new developments have taken place in Iran's relations with the West, especially with the United States, whose early signs were visible in the recent Geneva agreement. Such developments can have direct effects on the Russia’s interests in relation with Iran. While Putin worried that former President Barack Obama would succeed in his goal of improving Iranian-American relations and thus drawing Tehran away from Moscow, Trump’s hostility toward the Islamic Republic has allayed Putin’s concerns about this. Similarly, while Tehran often fears that Moscow will make a deal with Washington at Iran’s expense, the continuation of Russian-American disagreements in Trump’s era, have allayed Iranian fears about this possibility. Russia’s strategic foreign policy goal is to prevent the consolidation of the United States’ global dominance. The Russian military operation in Syria elevated the US-Russia conflict into a geopolitical confrontation.

It seems that the increasing bargaining power of Iran and its ability to regulate its relations with Russia and the West after JCPOA, can make up for the country’s past failures in various areas of foreign policy, including for determining the shares of Caspian Sea littoral states from undersea energy resources. But in Kazakhstan Summit on August 12, 2018 it was clear

again that the littoral states did not accepted Iran's recognized rights in this lake, based on the Soviet era's treaties. Iran and Russia are among major producers and exporters of oil and gas and are, therefore, rivals in this field. Some observers note that they are competitors in energy markets. Iran can become Russia's competitor if it begins exporting natural gas to Europe, where Russia dominates the market. Iran can potentially play such a role in Caspian Region too.

Keywords: Central Asia, Geopolitics, Iran, JCPOA, Russia, South Caucasus, Syria, the Middle East, US.

Iran – Russia Relations within the Context of Regional Hegemony Struggles in the Middle East

Andrey Korotayev²

This paper suggests that for an adequate understanding of the development of the relations between Iran and Russia one should take into account the context of regional hegemony struggles in the Middle East. There are three main regional contenders for the regional hegemony in this part of the world: 1) Saudi Arabia; 2) Iran; 3) Qatari-Turkish alliance (acting in co-ordination with the pan-Arab Muslim Brotherhood network). The fourth contender, Egypt, went out of the competition after 2010 when it got into dependence on, firstly, Qatari-Turkish alliance, and, then, since July 2013, Saudi Arabia. Iran managed to strengthen its regional positions substantially after the US invasion in Iraq where Iran managed to increase its influence dramatically in the 2000s; it developed a strategic alliance with Damascus – forming a rather effective Iran – Iraq – Syria – Hezbollah axis, and increased significantly its influence in Palestine. In 2011 it managed to challenge Saudis on the Arabian ground by supporting protests in Bahrain and the East Province. The Arab Spring events in Yemen helped to improve substantially the positions of the main ally of Iran in this country – the Houthis – who eventually came to power in Sanaa in 2014-2015.

However, the most spectacular successes in the struggle for regional hegemony were achieved in the Arab Spring period in 2011–2012 by the Qatari-Turkish alliance. After the Egyptian January 25 (2011) revolution this alliance succeeded in enormous strengthening of the positions of Muslim Brothers who eventually came to power in Egypt in 2012. In Libya Turkey and Qatar strongly supported the anti-Qaddafi rebellion (with Qatari special forces even taking part in the final assault on Tripoli); they managed to translate this support in a very strong increase in the positions of the Libyan Muslim Brothers after the assassination of al-Qaddafi. In particular, they arranged the Muslim Brothers eventually getting leading positions in the General National Council elected by the Libyans in July 2012. In Tunisia Ennahda movement (rather close to the Muslim Brothers) managed to win the first free elections in October 2011 and to form a government. At the “Syrian front” Turkey and Qatar managed to secure leading positions of the Syrian Muslim Brothers in the main coordination center of the Syrian opposition outside Syria, the Syrian National Council formed in August 2011 in Istanbul, whereas the rebel factions supported by Turkey and Qatar made very serious territorial gains within Syria.

In Yemen forces rather close to the Muslim Brothers came to power after the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh in February 2012. The influence of Turkey and Qatar dramatically

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increased in Palestine (at the expense of the Iranian influence). In Morocco in November 2011 the head of the sister of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party Abdelilah Benkirane (leading a party with the same name as Erdogan's party) was appointed Prime Minister of Morocco. In Jordan Muslim Brothers led the protests in 2011 and were even invited to join the Jordanian Cabinet of Ministers. The influence of Al Jazeera in 2011 immensely increased, its broadcasts played a major role in the diffusion of the Arab Spring tsunami, and some analysts even called the Arab Revolts "al Jazeera Revolution". In 2011 Qatar even undertook an (almost successful) attempt to get its Foreign Minister elected as the Secretary-General of the Arab League.

Last but not least, Qatar in December 2010 won its bid to hold 2022 FIFA World Cup, which also strongly supported the Qatari-Turkey quest for the regional hegemony (due to the extreme popularity of football in the Middle East). Another important point is that by mid-2013 Qatar and Turkey secured the US support for the Muslim Brotherhood (especially in Egypt). Note that the Qatari-Turkey alliance turned out to be a rather effective arrangement. Indeed, notwithstanding its huge economic, demographic, and military potential (comparable to the one of Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt), Turkey (as a non-Arab) state could hardly try to achieve a regional hegemony alone in the predominantly Arab region (incidentally, this is a serious obstacle for the Iranian efforts too). On the other hand, Qatar, notwithstanding its huge financial resources and its undeniable Arab identity, is too small to make alone any serious attempts to achieve the regional hegemony. Qatar and Turkey managed to produce in 2010–2012 a rather impressive bid for regional hegemony only after they united their forces together, adding to it a huge political potential of the Muslim Brotherhood pan-Arab network.

However, in 2013 Saudi Arabia and its allies managed to mount a rather successful counteroffensive. Its central element was the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt accomplished in alliance with the Egyptian military and some other internal Egyptian and international forces. In January 2014 under enormous pressure Ennahda had to step down from power in Tunisia. In Libya, with support of Saudi Arabia and its allies, Khalifa Haftar started in May 2014 his vigorous "Dignity Operation" that led to a dramatic reduction of influence of the Muslim Brothers (and, consequently, Turkey & Qatar) in this country. On the "Syrian front", Saudi Arabia managed to decrease dramatically the Muslim Brothers' influence in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (that replaced the Syrian National Council as the main coordination center of the Syrian opposition outside Syria) and to increase the influence of the pro-Saudi rebel factions within Syria. The influence of Muslim Brothers dramatically declined in Jordan. Saudi Arabia started a rather successful assault on the Muslim Brothers throughout the Arab World (including Saudi Arabia itself). In Yemen Saudi Arabia and its allies after 2014 managed to prevent the establishment of the Houthi control over this country, and, though they paid for this a very high cost, established their control over much more than 50% of the Yemeni territory.

At the moment, Saudi Arabia seems to be the only Middle Eastern power that actually strives to achieve the regional hegemony, whereas for Iran, Turkey, and Qatar their main aim

in the regional hegemonic struggles for the time being appears to be the prevention of the establishment of an absolute Saudi hegemony in the Middle East, which might explain to some extent the recent improvement of the Iran-Qatari relationship, as well as certain, albeit rather uneasy, cooperation between Iran and Turkey in Syria (which still helped to reduce the Saudi influence in this country, although the heavy Saudi involvement in Yemen might have played here an even more important role). What relevance does this have for our understanding of the development of the relations between Iran and Russia? The point is that at present Russia is trying to develop good relations with all the main participants of the regional hegemonic struggles (with the only exception of the Muslim Brothers, which does not appear to be relevant here) – with Iran, with Saudi Arabia, with Turkey, and with Qatar.

From what has been discussed above it is quite clear that at present the development of positive relations between Russia and Turkey/Qatar is more or less compatible with the development of positive relations between Russia and Iran. However, this cannot be said about the Russian-Saudi relations. On the other hand, it is extremely important for Russia to have good relations both with Iran and with Saudi Arabia (and it is very important for Saudi Arabia to have good relations with Russia). The point is that with respect to the oil price issue Saudi Arabia and Russia are bound to remain strategic allies in the forthcoming future. Both countries prosperity is heavily dependent on the oil prices, and the events of the recent years demonstrated this in a rather salient way. The precipitous decline of the oil prices in 2014–2015 resulted in a pronounced economic recession in Russia, but it also caused substantial financial and economic problems in Saudi Arabia as well. In December 2014 that time Saudi oil minister Ali al-Naimi claimed that Saudi Arabia would not cut oil production even if the price of oil fell to \$20 a barrel. However, already in 2015, well before the oil price reached \$30, Saudi revenues fell dramatically; as a result Saudi Arabia ran a deficit of 367 billion riyals (\$97.9 billion) or 15 percent of gross domestic product, and had to cut expenses rather seriously, which affected its socioeconomic dynamics in a rather painful way.

As a result, in 2016 both Saudi Arabia and Russia opted to reduce finally their oil production in order to stabilize the oil prices – a move, from which both countries benefited very substantially. On the other hand, the 2014–2016 oil price crisis demonstrated in a rather salient way that the behavior of Saudi Arabia and Russia is actually the major determinant of the global oil price levels. Indeed, the decline of the global oil prices was only stopped when in 2016 Saudi Arabia and Russia came to the agreement on the oil production control, which was supported enthusiastically by the OPEC and some other oil exporting countries, resulting in the rather effective OPEC+ agreement. In this respect, the 2014–2016 events demonstrated quite clearly that the economic prosperity of both Russia and Saudi Arabia is heavily dependent on the effective co-ordination of actions of the both countries at the global oil market. This creates one of the main risks for the continuation of the current Russian foreign policy in the Middle East aimed at the development of good relations simultaneously with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Alliance, Iran, Regional Hegemony, Middle East, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey.

Iran and Russia after US Exit from JCOPA: Possibilities and Prospects

Davoud Gharayagh-Zandi³

Before making some remarks on the Iran and Russia relations after the US exit from the JCPOA that is our main agenda of this session, it needs to investigate a critical question that invoked many different academic and practice discussions in the domestic environments of two countries. It is that is there a strategic ally between two countries? This question is of paramount important in order to arranging this relation in the various issues. It does normally debate with some confusion on it. Therefore, why it is occasionally mentioning rather the all related experts explained it. The answer would be finding out on the meaning of strategy in itself. Any discussion on strategy is related to the war and how could be conduct it and also all related issues to the war in the widespread categories from the military to the politics.

Actually, the main aspects of the both countries' relations do corresponded to the military and the missiles, the space technologies and that nowadays so-calling it a strategic interactions. In the other meaning Russia does try to facilitate Iran's military instruments for defending itself in facing with the West pressures in so that according to the International customs permitted. This issue may be a false perception that there is a kind of indirect strategic perception on coping with the West in the ultimate outcome. But it is just come into the military trade from the Russian side in particular. It needs to mention that it is of useful for the both in bilateral relations and also set a proper context in order to spreading the cooperative ties in the other issues. In addition, it is necessary to evolve an articulated strategy for developing the relations in the level of interdepend measures too. In this regard, the two countries need to a successful strategy for the future. Successful strategy is here based on clearly identifying political goals, assessing common comparative advantage relative to the enemy, calculating costs and benefits carefully, and examining the risks and rewards of alternative strategies. By this definition it could be expecting to reach a reasonable interaction for the both in future based on an apprising review on the past.

On May 2018 the US did exit from the JCPOA. In this regards, it would be from the two different perceptions meaning that Iran and Russia did come back on their previously dot and the also it could be set forth a new possibility for the future. There are acceptable justifications for the both; the former one believed that the JCPOA signed for opening the new way on Iran's foreign policy towards the West beside the Eastern one. As if, it would be not expecting the new dramatically change between two countries' relations. Whom have enthusiasm for the latter, deems that not only does the JCPOA shed light on the Iran's nuclear program from the international legitimacy that would be precious affecting on the both bilateral relations in this issue, but also does it set the proper context for arranging the new possibilities for

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cooperation in the related common interesting regions such as in the Syrian crisis and also on Afghanistan issue in the possible future beside of the bilateral one.

By utilizing the new opportunities made in the post-JCPOA situation from the both sides' national interests and their potentialities and restrictions in the practical manner, it could be cultivate to deepen and widen the fruitful relations of the two neighbor countries in the many issues such as military industries, nuclear program, petrochemicals, space, oil and gas infrastructure and industries in the bilateral one and also in relative to the common regional and international issues in the inviting prospects faced them. In any section needs to evaluate the current situation and find profits of two countries and assessing the future economy interactions. For example, in trade balance of Iran with Russia has negative results (-1332B\$). Two countries are not the main trading partners. The main partners of Iran are China (19.5%), UAE (16.8%) and EU (16.3%) in sequence and Russia does not the precious place in Iran's foreign trade unfortunately. It is precious note that this process would be going smoothly if it does endeavor in due caution by the try and error and get the historical experiences and also slide toward the gradually opening door for a kind of strategic partnership may be reachable in this growing manner.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, JCPOA, Bilateral Relations, Regional Studies.

Prospects for Russian-Iranian Cooperation in the Middle East

Leonid Issaev⁴

Despite the fact that the American strategy in the Middle East is still devoid of systematicity and is in many respects situational, some dominants around which the policy of the United States in the region is built could be highlighted. One of these dominants, of course, is the priority of US-Israeli relations and, as a consequence, the consideration of the national security interests of Israel. This largely predetermined the US's very tough stance on the Syrian crisis, which actually reduced itself to the elimination of Iran's presence in the Arab republic. This topic became the leitmotif of recent negotiations between US National Security Adviser John Bolton and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. While being in Israel, John Bolton repeatedly made it clear that he is going to visit Geneva to conduct "hard bargaining" on Syria, and he [expects](#) "to get Iran — Iranian forces, Iranian militias, Iranian surrogates out of the offensive operations" from Moscow. At the same time, John Bolton [referred](#) to the words of Vladimir Putin, who in a personal conversation with him noted the mismatch of the interests of Moscow and Tehran in Syria.

However, Washington's intention to achieve foreign policy isolation of the Iranian regime, primarily through reaching agreements with Moscow, looks unrealistic. The reasons for Moscow's refusal from the joint US-Israeli proposal on Iran lie not only in the fact that Washington continues to negotiate from a position of strength, while the Russian leadership expects dialogue on an equal footing. As Russian senator Alexei Pushkov [noted](#) by the results of the meeting in Geneva, "the US administration is trying to get from Russia such a shift in positions that would mean a full turn on Syria". However, in this bargaining, abandoning its even situational ally in Syria in the face of Iran, Moscow can not get Washington clear about what it will receive in return. US assurances that the softening of Russia's position on Iran would lead to a softening of US sanctions, sound unconvincing for Moscow. Firstly, because the Kremlin is well aware that the lifting of sanctions is the prerogative of the Congress, but not the American president. And this means that the agreements with Donald Trump on Syria are clearly not enough to advance in the issue of lifting the sanctions.

Secondly, the Russian leadership is not ready for an open conflict with Iran. In addition to the Syrian crisis, Moscow and Tehran still have a very extensive agenda, according to which the parties conduct a dialogue. And not only Iran, but also Russian (for example, in the field of energy, Afghanistan, etc.) remain interested in it. Finally, American promises to reach a new level of relations are clearly not enough for Moscow due to the high level of mistrust towards the United States. The Russian leadership has repeatedly made Iran a bargaining chip

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in negotiations with the United States in 1995 after signing the Memorandum Between Albert Gor and Viktor Chernomyrdin and in 2010, when Russia imposed a ban on supplying Iran with the S-300 in accordance with the UN Security Council resolution 1929.

However, in both cases there was never a real "reset" and warming in relations between Moscow and Washington. Moreover, the very controversial background of Russian-Iranian relations has contributed to the formation of phobias in the minds of Iranians regarding the possible normalization of Russian-American relations. But there are also more objective reasons that do not allow Moscow to agree with the American demand for Syria. It is unlikely that the Russian leadership is cunning when it [calls](#) Iran's withdrawal from Syria «unrealistic». Despite the fact that Russia remains a key actor in the Syrian conflict, its influence on the "allies" is not unlimited. Apparently, putting forward such a requirement, Washington and Tel Aviv refer to the experience of diversion of pro-Iranian forces beyond the 50-mile zone along the border of Syria and the Golan Heights. However, the "successful" experience of de-Iranization in the south of Syria can not be extrapolated throughout the country. In this case it is necessary to bear in mind two circumstances.

First, the deal on the South of Syria is not so much the result of Moscow's pressure on Tehran, but a consequence of the Iranian leadership belief that the withdrawal of pro-Iranian forces from the border zone is in their own interests. In other words, the Kremlin managed to convince the Iranian establishment that the voluntary withdrawal of their militias would minimize the costs of clashes with Israel, but at the same time retain the influence of the Syrian government in southern Syria. At the same time, it is hardly possible to find convincing arguments in favor of the fact that the complete withdrawal of pro-Iranian forces from Syria will only strengthen the influence of Tehran and Baath regime in the country. Second, Moscow is well aware that the very possibility of delimiting the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian armed forces appears unrealizable in the current circumstances. For almost eight years of the civil war in Syria, the Iranians have so strongly integrated into the structure of the Syrian armed forces that their elimination will entail the dismantling of the whole system.

A British researcher of Iraqi origin Aymenn al-Tamimi, using the example of the Local Defense Forces (LDF), [shows](#) that the IRGC project in Syria originally aimed at taking the armed forces system under its control not through domination, but via integration into it to become later an inseparable part of it. "LDF can be described as a joint project of the Syrian military and the IRGC, with officers from both sides featured in the command structure". The possibility of Iran's withdrawal from Syria became even more illusory when Iranian Defense Minister Amir Khatami [signed](#) military cooperation deal between Iran and Syria after the meeting with Bashar Assad. All these circumstances make the achievement of any agreements on Syria without the participation of Iran unrealizable. So, Washington can hardly count on Moscow's help on the withdrawal of pro-Iranian forces from Syria.

Keywords: Cooperation, Iran, Middle East, Russia, Syrian Conflict.

US Withdrawal from the JCPOA and the Prospects for Iran-Russia Cooperation in Syria

Hamidreza Azizi⁵

On May. 8, 2018, US President Donald Trump announced his country's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA), while re-imposing the sanctions which were previously lifted under the nuclear deal. The decision was actually part of the Trump Administration's general policy of increasing pressures on the Islamic Republic and attempting to compel Iran to enter into negotiations on a more comprehensive framework, ranging from the nuclear issue to Iran's regional activities and defense program. As a result, attempting to contain Iran's regional influence and to change its behavioral pattern in the region is now a top priority for Washington within the context of its Middle East policy. Needless to say, as the Syrian issue has been the most evident case of Iran's regional activism over the past several years, restricting Tehran's role in Syria is an important aspect of Trump's anti-Iran approach. As a signatory to the JCPOA, Russia was quick to criticize the US withdrawal, calling on Washington to respect its international commitments. On the other hand, since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, Iran and Russia have introduced themselves as the main supporters of the Syrian government, helping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to preserve his rule in the country. Since September 2015, when Moscow started its direct military campaign in Syria, Moscow-Tehran cooperation in the Arab country started to strengthen even further.

As a result, if Donald Trump's hostile approach toward the Islamic Republic is to affect Iran's role in Syria, it would impact Iran-Russia partnership in Syria as well. Generally speaking, it seems that the US approach could have a dual effect on this issue, working as both an opportunity and a challenge for the development of Iran-Russia cooperation in Syria. First of all, one should take into account that at the same time as the United States has toughened its Iran policy, Moscow-Washington relations have reached a new low over issues such as the Ukraine Crisis and the alleged Russian intervention in the 2016 US presidential elections. At the same time, the United States under President Trump has shown less willingness toward getting involved in the international initiatives aimed at finding a solution to the Syrian Crisis, and this in turn, has decreased the potentials for a meaningful coordination to be formed between Russia and the US on the Syrian issue. As a result, Russia has shifted its political and diplomatic investment toward the alternative frameworks in which Moscow plays the role of the main coordinator, most importantly the Astana Peace Process.

Although Kremlin has always declared that Astana is in no way a competitor to the broader framework of Geneva Talks, it has become the most effective way for dealing with the real situation on the ground in Syria and has developed its agenda from freezing the conflicts on

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the main battlefields to coordinating efforts for devising a new constitution for Syria. At the same time, Tehran, which had previously been ignored in different political frameworks regarding Syria, sees Astana as the only initiative which can bring about a real change in the situation in Syria while Iran's interests and considerations in the country are taken into account. In this vein, it could be said that being under pressure by the United States, Iran and Russia have intensified their joint efforts to preserve their influence and interests in Syria via alternative diplomatic initiatives.

On the other hand, after the re-imposition of the American sanctions, Iran has been looking for alternative ways to conduct international economic interactions and to escape the negative effects of the sanctions. In this vein, Iran's two main economic and political partners during the previous round of sanctions, i.e. Russia and China, have been once again given priority in Iran's foreign policy. As far as Russia is concerned, Tehran expects Moscow to remain active in areas such as energy and nuclear cooperation as well as other forms of economic and technical ties with Iran. In return, Iran appears to be trying more than before to observe Russian consideration in the areas of mutual interest, including the Syrian issue. Iran's compliance with Russia's request to pull its forces away from the Israeli-occupied Golan region in southern Syria, as well as giving its full endorsement to the Russian-brokered Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in Sochi, were the most important representations of such a tendency. As such, though stemming from political necessities, Iran's renewed interest toward the expansion of ties with Russia has been reflected in more coordination between the two sides in Syria.

However, the abovementioned points do not mean that the overall impact of the new, hardline US policy toward Iran would be positive and there wouldn't be any negative impact on Iran-Russia cooperation in Syria. In fact, at the current stage of the crisis in Syria that the Syrian government's fight against the rebel and terrorist groups is still far from over, Moscow needs to keep Iran on board in Syria in order to facilitate the process of defeating various armed groups. In other words, although Russia itself is not willing to let Iran's space for maneuvering to exceed a certain point in the Arab country, the presence of Iran and pro-Iran armed groups on the ground is of importance for the success of Russia's military plans in Syria. In this context, in case that the increasing US pressures lead to a scenario in which the Islamic Republic decides to downgrade the level of its regional involvement – whether as a result of worsening the economic situation at home or in order to avoid an open confrontation with the US in the region – it would be considered as a blow to Russia's strategic plans in Syria. In fact, apart from the possible vacuum of power that such a development could create on the Syrian battlefield, it would alter the balance of power in favor of anti-Assad forces, which in turn, would further complicate the process of political settlement in the country.

As a result, it could be said that although the increasing American pressures on Iran has so far resulted in a closer cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in Syria, it has the potential to disrupt their military and political partnership altogether. However, the final outcome will depend heavily on whether Iran and the remaining parties of the JCPOA can

find a way to keep the deal alive and to provide Iran with the economic benefits, as well the diplomatic support, which Tehran was supposed to benefit from under the nuclear deal.

Keywords: Iran, JCPOA, Middle East, Russia, Syria, US.

Russia's Balancing Act Between Iran and Israel

Yuri Barmin⁶

The relationship between Russia and Israel has always been an informal alliance, despite the fact given that Israel has traditionally been considered a key American ally in the region. The traditional focus on the settlement of the Palestinian problem, which is rapidly losing relevance in the Arab world amid talks about the Iranian threat, began to weaken in Russian-Israeli relations as soon as Moscow took a course toward a more active policy in the Middle East. Although Russia saw an opportunity to play a more significant role in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement after President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in the eyes of the Israeli leadership the Syrian conflict and the Iranian nuclear deal remain the two main issues for the Russian-Israeli bilateral agenda. Against the backdrop of the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Iran, some analysts began to assert that Russia assumed the role of the US as a guarantor of Israel's security and survival in the Middle East, but Israeli leadership hardly envisions such a role for Moscow. Nevertheless, Israel made it clear to Russia that it sees Moscow, not Washington, as the party responsible for preventing the escalation of tensions with Tehran into a full-fledged war.

Israel's position vis-a-vis the Syrian conflict began to change as Russia was getting involved deeper in the war in autumn 2015 as Damascus was losing its grip over the country and Iran was growing stronger. The expectation in Tel Aviv was that Moscow would check Tehran's influence in Syria and control Bashar Al Assad, making the outcome of the Syrian war more favorable to Israel's interests. Israel's principle of non-involvement in the conflict and its renouncement of the policy of regime change made Russia more receptive to its concerns, which is why Moscow allowed Israel to have a degree of operational freedom when it comes to perceived national security threats. Vladimir Putin, however, made it clear to Benjamin Netanyahu in September 2015 that he does not see mere presence of Iran in Syria as an imminent threat to Israel. The temporary escalation between Israel and Iran in the southwest of Syria in the first half of 2018 did not fundamentally change the position of the Russian leadership with regard to impact that Iran's expansion may have on Israel's security. This escalation that risked erasing Russia's own gains in Syria was seen in Moscow as a shift in existing red lines.

Despite Moscow's operational dependence on the pro-Iranian armed forces and the strategic proximity of Russia's and Israel's position on Syria, one should not expect that in the confrontation between Iran and Israel, Russia will openly take the position of one of the parties. Strategically speaking, Moscow is out of good options when it comes to a potential conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv, which is why it will end up balancing between the two

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and position itself as a referee. With regard to Israel-Iran relations Russia's policy will amount to crisis management, while political dividends for it will be minimal. In the triangle of Iran-Russia-Israel, Moscow is aimed at maintaining a clear balance. Sergei Lavrov, for example, said last year that presence of Iranian forces in Syria is legitimate, while the expectation that Iran would leave the country is unrealistic. At the same time, the Russian Foreign Minister criticized Tehran for declaring the need to destroy Israel. Similarly on the issue of the Golan Heights, Russia also maintains a balanced position: All official statements and documents, including the final communiqué of the Syrian Congress in Sochi, recognize this region as part of Syria. Nevertheless, Russian military aircraft avoid violating the airspace of the Golan Heights, *de facto* recognizing Israel's sovereignty over them.

Low-key confrontation between Israel and Iran is the status quo, which at this stage is comfortable Russia. Moscow can not demand from Iran, an equal ally, officially invited to Syria by the government, to withdraw its military capabilities while Russia itself was able to cement its military position in Syria by acquiring two bases. Thus, Israel's campaign to consistently undermine Iran's military capabilities on the ground and weaken its influence partly serves Russia's interests. Most likely, Moscow will have to reconcile with Tehran's desire to have a military presence in Syria, but it will also have to take larger responsibility for keeping Iran's military presence in check. Closely linked to the issue of Syria is the future of the Iran nuclear deal. Despite the fact that Israel supported US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Tel Aviv should be alarmed at this development since in the event of the deal's failure Iran may respond asymmetrically through more assertive military positioning in Syria, thus catalyzing Israel's national security threats. The round of escalation between Iran and Israel on May 10, just two days after Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA, is indicative of that and marks the merger of Syria and the nuclear deal in a single political file in Israel.

Judging by the fact that the Iran discourse in Israel has changed after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and focuses more on Tehran as a source of regional problems, the dialogue between Russia and Israel on the nuclear deal is unlikely to be broad, while the main struggle for Moscow will be to return the focus from political issues to the nuclear program itself. Russia, however, will also find it hard balancing between different circles of Iranian political elites. The Iranian leadership is not unanimous with regard to a potential response to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. While President Hassan Roukhani stands for joint work with Europe, Russia and China to preserve the treaty, the military escalation between Israel and Iran in Syria means that hawks in Tehran advocate for the country's symmetrical withdrawal from the deal.

Keywords: Balancing Act, Iran, Israel, Russia, Security, Syrian conflict.

Strategic Cooperation in the Transitional Period: Iran and Russia

Bahador Aminian⁷

The international system is in the transitional period and is experiencing a dramatic transformation. The main actors are in the stage of determining their world position and shaping the course of the main processes that characterize the shape of the future system. On the other hand in this transitional period, the regional level and regional powers have (acquired) independent and more crucial role in the international politics. The United States as the only remaining superpower is trying to use this opportunity and consolidate its hegemonic power. Iran and Russia in this new circumstance have been the main target of US hegemony. Iran and Russia have had bilateral, regional and international ties and connections. As historical neighbors, these cultural, economic, political and security relations have been very important and strategic for both countries. Iran and Russia are cooperating in different regions and areas. Stability and peace in these regions are the main goal and concern of both countries for which they have done their best to cooperate. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif emphasized 'the depth of the strategic relations between Iran and Russia, which still plays a key role in establishing security and stability in our region'.

Although Iran-Russia strategic cooperation in Syria has been considered as one of the highest levels of strategic ties, these two countries have had a long history of strategic cooperation in different areas especially in the neighboring regions. Iran-Russia cooperation for peace-building and Stabilization measures in Tajikistan in the 90s led to peace and stability there. Russia and Iran worked together in bringing an end to the five-year Tajik civil war (1992-97). Peace and stability in the central Asia and Caucasus have been the joint policy of both countries and they have done their best and cooperate for that. During the Taliban government in Afghanistan which most Arab countries along western countries supported Taliban, Iran and Russia supported Afghan forces opposing the Taliban. Their cooperation made resistant movement in northern front alive. In the Caspian Sea region, on 14 August 2018: the five littoral states Iran, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have signed an agreement on the Caspian Sea, which is the world's largest enclosed body of water and a region that has been the subject of dispute since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. They settled some of the big questions regarding the resource-rich sea. Another feature of the agreement that has wider implications is a prohibition on military vessels from non-littoral states in the sea.

Transit routes and connection are the other aspect of bilateral relations: The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a 7,200-km-long multi-mode network of the ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia,

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Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia, and Europe. From 2011 the so-called Arab spring events changed the courses in the Middle East. The extremism and the terrorist groups benefited from the situation and vast support which were provided for them by the Arab reach sheikhdom. The main target of these terrorist groups was Iran and Russia. The US presence and large military power and installations did not prevent terrorist groups to impose their threat to the region. There are numerous analyses which shows confronting terrorism were not the main priority of US forces in the region and The US has tried to use these groups as a policy leverage. They did not manage any great operation against these terrorist groups. ISIS during this period has succeeded to keep control of most part of Syria and main parts of Iraq (with the presence of US forces). The western-led operation in Libya and Syria were planned to cut Russian and Iranian influence in the region.

Cooperation between Iran and Russia has gone further and expanded step by step. This cooperation began with combating terrorism and succeeded in defeating ISIS which controlled important parts of Syria. ISIS after its victory and based on the support it gets from Arab countries had the claim of Khilafat. ISIS had many bases in many Arab countries and also controlled important parts in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan, and other countries. It means that ISIS was very incremental danger and posed the real threat for the world security and stability. Iran- Russia cooperation in Syria was not confined to combating terrorism and spread of terrorism in the region but expanded to the stabilization phase. New constitution which guarantees the right of Syrian people and integrity of the country would be the main bases for the stability in the future. Cooperation in the global level is one of the most important aspects of Iran –Russia relations. International system is experiencing the harsh policies of us hegemony.

The United States is trying to take advantage of this opportunity and consolidate its hegemony. The America-first slogan and behavior is the manifestation of this goal. Trump administration is trying to eliminate international agreements, organizations, pacts and other institution which strengthen multilateralism and prevent unilateralism. Destroying WTO, ICC, PARIS AGREEMENT (CLIMATE PACT), JCPOA, UNESCO, UN HUMAN RIGHT COUNCILE,UN Global Compact on Migration ,NATFA, Trans-Pacific Partnership (Trump withdrawal Doctrin) move of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem,... are only parts of this policy. Applying U.S. domestic laws to other countries, Using sanction and misusing us supremacy in international markets ,swift system, power of US \$ are other parts of this policy. Trump is trying to misuse these priorities to push the independent countries and establish its favorable system and order. RUSSIA, China, and regional powers are subjects of this hegemonic policy and should react appropriately. These countries could balance us in the military and political areas. This is time to counterbalance these policies especially in the economic, finance, political and narrative building areas.

Conclusion: Stability and peace in the international system and regions are the main goal and concern of IRAN AND RUSSIA.Confronting terrorism, the stability and territorial integrity of the regional countries and the right to determination of the people of the region

are among the common goals of the two countries in the regional level. In the Syria, with brilliant results, these actions should be achieved by establishing a new constitution and eliminating terrorist groups and determining the state of the country based on the will of the people. The cooperation of the countries of the region in the framework of the Astana process is a good approach for this goal. In the international system level, both countries are against the US hegemony and unilateralism policies. Both countries are the target of hegemonic policies, sanctions and extremism for which they should coordinate their views, stances and policies more. In the harsh circumstances which trump created, Russia would play crucial role in coordination with other powers. Counter balancing measures in the finance, economic, energy and communication media aspects are the main new battlefield. Building a multipolar world is the goal of many powers in the world and it needs new initiation to get rid of U.S supremacy and hegemonic measures especially in the finance, economy and narrative building.

Despite these favorable and positive bases for cooperation and integration, there seems to be a great deal of concern between the two countries. The two countries need to share more effort and mutual understanding and should not look and judge each other from the windows of Western media. Think thanks, elites and university scholars can play a very constructive role in this regard and can provide the real bases for the development of economic, political, cultural, security and strategic relations. However, Decision making groups are considered to be missing links to further development of bilateral relationships. Expanding economic connections, using the priorities of every side and especially expanding transit routes, coordinating in oil and gas policies, establishing regional policies consultation bodies, expanding think thanks connections (such as joint seminar, round tables, joint publications, courses), media connections, mutual understanding and respects.

Keywords: International System, Iran, Middle East, Regional Cooperation, Russia, Stability.

Mutual Cooperation of Russia and Iran in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities

Alisa Shishkina⁸

Iran and Russia are concerned about the soft security threats in Central Asian states, resulting from the volatile situation in Afghanistan. Thus, Iran, promoting the unifying idea of the three Persian-speaking countries - Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, perceives the ongoing instability in Afghanistan might spill over into Central Asia through Tajikistan. In addition, Iran has hosted hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees in recent decades. These refugees not only have a heavy burden on Iran's economy, but also are seen to be a threat to law and order. Security on the Caspian Sea and adjacent territories is also one of the priority areas for cooperation between Russia and Iran through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other law enforcement agencies. There are channels of illegal transfer of contraband goods, including drugs. In addition to cooperation in the field of security, there are a number of issues of particular interest for both countries. This, for example, is the division of the Caspian Sea and the presence of the United States in this region. In addition to the disagreement between the two countries on this issue and Iran's rejection of bilateral agreements and separate attempts to change the status of the Caspian, they have always opposed the domination of third forces and are actively holding back the arms race in the region. Russia and Iran believe that the Caspian Sea should retain the status of the demilitarized zone in the long term, and support each other in the issue of the Nabucco pipeline, opposing the laying of the branch along the Caspian Sea bottom.

The need for cheap hydropower is a matter of particular importance for Russia, China and Iran. For the latter, water in large quantities is necessary for the development of nuclear power – this industry is the leader in water consumption, since colossal water reserves are required to cool the facilities. Over the past 20 years, all attempts to resolve this problem either at the intra-regional level, or with the involvement of a third party not directly interested in it, inevitably failed (for example, in 2000s, German organizations were very actively involved in the process). The main reason was that it is simply impossible to reach a consensus in the absence of a hegemon in the basins of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. A special role of Russia in the settlement of the water problem in Central Asia is also explained by the fact that under current conditions it can be confidently said that the implementation of any major hydropower project will take place with the financing of Russia and / or China, the participation of their contractors; these two countries present a guaranteed demand for the cheap energy of the new stations, and they will ultimately guarantee their safety.

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In relation to Transcaucasia, Iran basically has two geopolitical imperatives: controlling various religious and ethnic elements as well as creating a security regime facing potential threats from outside the region that other major forces can represent. Iranian involvement in regional processes in South Caucasus is associated with four main options. This is the deepening of ties with Armenia (with a rather cautious approach in de facto recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh); attempts to influence the situation in Azerbaijan; building pragmatic relations with Russia and, if possible, reducing its role in the South Caucasus region, as well as squeezing out Turkish influence. The last vector finds understanding in the Kremlin, where the efforts of Erdogan in the Caucasus (from "quiet" Islamization to pan-Turkic ambitions) are considered a threat to Russian interests. In addition to religious and educational activities, Ankara's economic interests also interfere with the interests of Russia. We can say that an interesting scenario of crossing two geopolitical vectors unfolds in the region. The "North-South" axis represents the Russia-Armenia-Iran line, while the "West-East" axis is expressed in the interaction of Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan, which are believed to conduct pro-American policy in the region.

Keywords: Cooperation, Russia, Iran, Central Asia, Islamic State, Security, Post-Soviet Space.

Russia and Iran in Central Asia: Prospects and Challenges for Cooperation

Nikolay Kozhanov⁹

Since the fall of the USSR, Moscow has been trying to play the role of a leading power in the ex-Soviet territories. It was and still is extremely jealous to any attempts of third powers to penetrate to these regions. As stated in the official documents, the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the CIS Member States generally constitutes a priority direction of the Russian foreign policy. Moscow's cooperation with the ex-Soviet republic is all-embracing. It is developing in political, economic and cultural spheres. Special attention is paid to the cooperation with the members of the CIS "in ensuring mutual security, including joint efforts to combat common challenges and threats, primarily international terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration. The priorities here include elimination of terrorist and drug trafficking threats emanating from the territory of Afghanistan and prevention of risks of destabilization of the situations in Central Asia and Transcaucasia". As a result, whenever Moscow takes decisions on Iran, it is concerned with possible implications for Russian relations with the members of the CIS. This, situation has a number of outcomes for the IRI. Thus, on one hand, experts argue that, in certain cases, Russia considers the stable relations with the countries of the Commonwealth as more important than the development of the dialog with Iran. That was the case of the division of the Caspian Sea between Russia and Kazakhstan in 2002 – 2003, when Moscow broke the previously achieved agreement to handle this issue only in the five-sided format. This allowed the Russians to bridge relations with Astana, but temporarily damaged the relations with Tehran expecting the joint settlement of territorial issues.

On the other hand, Iran is traditionally considered by the Russian authorities as an influential regional power whose support is important for securing the Russian interests in the CIS region. The political elite of Russia remember that, as opposed to Turkey, the IRI did not use the fall of the Soviet Union for the aggressive spread of its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia by propagating the ideas of the Islamic revolution and funding local nationalistic and religious movements. Moreover, during the mid-1990s, Moscow and Tehran joined their efforts aimed at the cessation of the civil war in Tajikistan. This Iranian behaviour demonstrated that Tehran could be a helpful partner, although these steps of the authorities of the IRI were not altruistic, but pragmatic (after the fall of the USSR, Russia was not seen as a political threat and ideological rival. On the contrary, in the situation of the actual international isolation of the Islamic republic, the cooperation with the RF was expected to bring tangible results). Due to the similar with Russia approaches of the Iranian authorities towards a number of regional issues, Tehran is considered by Moscow as an important partner

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in Central Asia and the Caspian region. Both states try to respect the geopolitical interests of each other and to coordinate their efforts in fighting separatism and extremism in the region as well as in preventing the aggravation of the political situation in Central Asia. Russo-Iranian interaction in the counteraction to the regional terrorist activities and the traffic of Afghan drugs is also an important part of the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran.

Iran is not completely trusted by the Russian authorities. However, taking into account the importance of the dialog with Moscow, the authorities of the IRI avoid irritating the RF and, thus, never officially position Iran as a Russian rival in the region. On the contrary, Iran declares Russia as one of reliable partners: in practice, it periodically cooperates with Russia in certain economic projects and political issues. This cooperation happens either on the bilateral basis or within the framework of the regional organisations such as the OIC and SCO. It is necessary to note that the active Iranian participation in the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is favoured by the Russian government as strengthening the role of this structure in Central Asia.

The strategy of Iranian penetration in Central Asia also finds positive response in Moscow: since the late-1990s, Iran has been concentrating its attention on preferably economic and cultural cooperation with ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia without accentuating political and ideological aspects. At the same time, the political goal pursued by Tehran is not a secret for the authorities of the RF: the IRI strives for the stabilisation of the situation in the region and counteracts to the Western encroachment to the region. Under these circumstances, this Iranian behaviour creates certain background for the Russo-Iranian economic cooperation in the region (primarily in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). On one hand, the unvoiced arch-goals of the Iranian diplomacy in Central Asia relatively correspond to the interests of Moscow. However, Russia, formally, does not support any political aspirations of Tehran by taking part in solely cultural and economic undertakings. On the other hand, the IRI with its close cultural and historical ties with Central Asia is partly use by Russia as a force opening the road for the return of Moscow to the region (through the participation in projects initiated by Iran and its Central Asian partners).

The Russian government pays special attention to the cooperation with Iran on Afghanistan considering the later as a source of current and potential threats to the security of the CIS. First of all, Moscow supports Iranian efforts in the counteraction to the Afghan drug-traffic. Russia periodically conducts necessary consultations with the Iranians on related issues and provides technical and information support. The RF also positively responses to the attempts of Tehran to participate in the anti-drug projects implemented within the framework of the CIS, SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

Keywords: Central Asia, CIS region, Cooperation, Ideological Rival, Iran, Regional Power, Russia.

Possibilities in US-Russian Relations and Iranian Approaches

Heidarali Masoudi¹⁰

Since Trump came into office in Jan 2017, there has been very different speculation about the future of US-Russian relations. In the one hand, there have been some experts who believe that Trump is very serious in finding a diplomatic breakthrough in bilateral relations with Moscow, especially since its deterioration after Crimea annexation. On the other hand, some experts argue that Russia interference in US Presidential election in 2016 and cyber war against US infrastructure leave no room for any kind of reconciliation and rapprochement in bilateral relations. After Trump-Putin summit meeting in Helsinki, Finland, more or less, these two optimistic and pessimistic approach continue to exist. Some experts optimistically pointed to friendly rhetoric by two Presidents in press conference and their hope for organizing next meeting as a sign of hope in mitigating tension between two countries. This meeting can be a starting point for further confidence-building measures in the future. In contrast, some pessimistic experts argue that this meeting triggered an aggressive reaction among US political elites and they would attempt to block any other actions by Trump to normalize relationship with Russia.

The relation between Russia and the West has been always the subject of curiosity among Iranian scholars, intellectuals and practitioners for a long period of time. Today there are a wide range of approaches regarding the true intentions of Russia in its relations with both the West and Iran. It remains the case now, especially in respect to several developments at international and regional levels. The US withdrawal from JCPOA and Russian cautious and modest reaction and also some alleged coordination between Russia/US and also Russia/Israel to manage and control the Iranian presence in Syria, reinforced the pessimistic views among Iranian elite, arguing that Russian opportunistic foreign policy could have negative impacts on Iranian foreign and security policy in the region and deprive Iran of its real benefits from JCPOA. Therefore, it seems fair to say that academic and political elites in Iran have been very sensitive to Russian relationship with the West as a whole and bilateral relations with the US in specific.

My question here is that what would be the possibilities in the US-Russian bilateral relations and which of them is favorable for Iranian political elite? It seems that the future of US-Russian relations depends heavily on the public opinions in the one hand and approaches and attitudes among political elites in two countries on the other hand. In respect to US-Russian public opinion about foreign policy issues, according to a survey conducted by Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Levada Center in Moscow and published in Feb 2018, while 46 % of Russian respondents in Jan 2017 expecting bilateral relations would improve

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with the election of Trump, they decreased to 14 % in December 2017. In the same vein, 51 % of Russian respondents say that US-Russian relations have not changed and 28 % say the relations have worsened. It is also the same for American public opinions. According to the result of that survey, American views of Russia continue to be negative at levels not seen since the cold war. In Jan 2017 46 % of American respondents described Russia as an adversary while in June 2017 the same question received 52 %.

The above results show that public opinions in the US and Russia have been turned to negative views toward each other and became more pessimistic about any breakthrough in the current situation. Based on the brief analysis of political ideas among experts, three futures would be possible in US-Russian relations. The first one is 'alliance' or 'full engagement'. It means that westernizers take upper hand in Russia and follow a reconciliatory approach with the West and especially with the US. Westernizers see Russia's future inside the wider Atlantic world. For the advocates of this view, Trump willingness to have a new age of relations and even a full-scale rapprochement with Russia would be a God gift.

Second option is 'full adversary' or 'hard balancing' in which anti-western Slavophile camp in Russia reinforces its position even in post-Putin political system. Slavophiles see Russia as a unique civilization and view the outside world as hostile. Victory of Democrats in mid-term Congressional election in November would be a good news for anti-western camp in Russia. American Democrats strongly believed that after 'Russiagate scandals' in Trump administration, Russia would be considered as an 'existential threat' to American security and democracy because of Russian reliance on asymmetrical tools, hybrid war and cyber operation against American targets.

Third option is 'limited partnership'. It means US and Russia would cooperate on some issues and disagree and even compete on some others. It also implies that Mr. Putin's mission to restore Russian role in the world and to convince the US to treat Russia as a big power would continue. Russia tries to reinforce its position as a mediator in international and regional conflicts and stabilize its role as a balancing player between developed and under-developed world. In this option, there are some obstacles for improving relations between Russia and the US. These obstacles include lack of trust between two countries, different definition of terrorism, different approach to Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA), limited common economic interests, difficult investment climate and weakness of the rule of law in Russia and Ukraine and bad prospect for Minsk agreement. However, there are some common grounds for cooperation which include nuclear non-proliferation, military risk reduction measures, future of Syria, North Korean crisis and coordination in cyber security sphere.

Regarding Iranian approaches toward three possible futures of US-Russian relation, I want to categorize them into three main approaches including 'official-conservative', 'intellectual-liberal' and 'academic-nationalist' approaches. Each of these approaches prefer one of the possible futures which were outlined above. Firstly, Iranian official-conservative approach would prefer full adversary between Russia and the US. Its advocates argue that the main source of insecurity in Iranian and Russian neighborhood is 'imperialistic actions' by the US.

Therefore, confrontation with the US would be a common ground for Iran-Russian security cooperation. Some others go further and talk about a coalition between Iran-Russia-China as an axis for reconstructing new global order in post-western world.

Secondly, Iranian intellectual-liberal approach anticipates the ultimate alliance between Russia and the western countries. They argue that Russia and western countries have many different historical, economic, political and strategic linkages and vast areas for cooperation and coordination in the future. According to this background, Iran would not be the good choice for Russian foreign policy, comparing to priority of western countries for providing Russia with its technological and economic needs. Finally, Iranian academic-nationalist approach favors a limited partnership between Russia and the US as a best option for Iran. They insist that current US sanction against Iran and Russia can be a good starting point for closer relations between Iran and Russia to find ways for sanction evasion. Although they strongly oppose to humiliating program like 'oil-for-goods' which launched in Nov 2017, they believe that finding innovative solutions for financing trade between two countries on the basis of national currencies would be possible if political willingness does exist. Despite very negative views about Russian opportunistic and pragmatic policy toward Iranian nuclear issue, there has been a cautious hope among Iranian academic-nationalists who believe that personal connection between Mr. Putin and Trump can help Iran to send its diplomatic signals to Trump administration through Russians, hoping to manage Trump in a desirable way promoting Iranian national interests.

In my concluding remarks, I want to address two important questions which usually remain unanswered in the analysis of Iran-Russia bilateral relations. As my above analysis showed, the factor of the West and the US have had significant impacts on the dynamics of Iran-Russia relations. In the one hand, Russian pragmatic foreign policy toward Iran means that Iran can be viewed as a playing card in bargaining with the West. So an important question is that would Russia come into this conclusion that a balanced relation between Iran and the West would be in Russia's interests? And another critical question is that would Iran treat Russia as a real partner rather than just as an instrument in helping Iran in the absence of normal relations with western countries? I think it would be up to us to find meaningful answers to these critical questions.

Keywords: Hard Balancing, Iran, Limited Partnership, Russia, Slavophile Camp, Trump, US.

The US Factor in Iran-Russia Relations in Regional and International Contexts

Alireza Noori¹¹

"The United States of America" is one of the important variables in international relations, whose behavior changes have a relatively large direct and indirect impact on the behavior of other actors, international trends and institutions. Iran, Russia and their relations are no exception to this impact. Due to the special nature of their relationship with Washington, this effect is often large and complex. The practical implications of this effect can be verified in different Russia's approaches towards Iran because of different relationships with US during the "reset" period (Russia's agreement with resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran in Medvedev Presidency) in comparison with the third and fourth periods of Putin's presidency (Iran-Russia geopolitical cooperation in Syria). On the other hand, changing views in Iran to the West (US) has had special effects on its relations with Russia. Whenever in Iran there is (was) talk about restoration or intensification of relations with the West, simultaneously there are (were) ideas about limitation or expansion of relations with Russia. In this regard, we can refer to Iran's different look at Russia during Ahmadinejad's and Rouhani's periods, also before concluding JCPOA and after Tramp's withdrawal from it. During Ahmadinejad's period, because of his confrontational approach to US, Iran pursued policy of close relations with Russia. But in Rouhani's time, before Tramp presidency, especially during nuclear talks, there was a relatively positive look to the West (including US), and, consequently, the emphasis on Russia was reduced.

After the beginning of the Trump presidency and his challenging policies in international sense, including towards Iran and Russia, there has been speculations about the impact of these policies on Tehran-Moscow relations. Tehran, in the current situation, after intensifying tension with Tramp, and US withdrawal from JCPOA, and Trump's intention to exert "the most severe pressures" on Tehran, Iran, more than before, pushed to close relations with Russia as a balancing force. Russia is also due to deepening dispute with the West and the new Middle East policy has been inclined to use Iran's geopolitical potentials. The set of these issues and turmoil in the Middle East have increased the dynamics of Iran-Russia-US triangle more than before. Knowing that strengthening ties between Iran and Russia will intensify regional and international resistance to US policies, the White House has always tried to prevent it. US sometimes tried to use Moscow as a tool against Tehran. Russia, in its turn, sometimes has been sought to use the Iranian card to take advantages from US. In this regard, there is speculation about new deal between Moscow and Washington and its impact on Iran, because of two reasons;

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- Probable plan of improvement Moscow-Washington relations after Tramp-Putin visit in Helsinki,
- Some disagreements between Iran and Russia on management post-ISIS Syria.

Based on these speculations, Russia can use opportunity that Tramp is going to apply "severest pressures on Iran" to take advantages simultaneously from Iran, US and the region. Some people, especially in Iran, assume that Iran-Russia relations reached a strategic level (because of their close cooperation in Syria), but realities do not support such assumption. Lack of a strategy, lack of a stable model for cooperation and, consequently, unpredictability are important components of Iran-Russia relations. These deficiencies make it difficult to calculate how Tramp's policies affect these relations and how possible improvement of the Moscow-Washington relationship can affect Tehran. Any assessment in this regard should be made in the regional and international contexts. Although, Tramp' policies have increased possibility of changes in Iran-Russia-US triangle and also in Iran-Russia relations, stabilizing factors such as "geopolitics", "security", "struggle for power" and political culture will give continuity to current trends in these relations.

Even if any radical action is taken by US on Iran-Russia common interests, including in Syria, there is a possibility of further strengthening Tehran-Moscow ties. The inter-relationship between the threats and US aggressive approach towards Iran and Russia on various issues ranging from sanctions, Syrian issue, NATO expansion and anti-missile shield will make Iran and Russia more close. There are some reasons that can bring Tehran and Moscow to closer cooperation;

- Relatively common regional views in various political, economic and security fields
- complementary capacities as an influential actor in regional and trans-regional spaces.
- Mutual capacities to geographically and thematically balance each other's foreign policy
- A comprehensive look at cooperation and willingness to spread cooperation from one region to another (Middle East and Eurasia)
- Mutual geopolitical need, in particular to do deterrence against destabilizing policies of the West and its allies.
- Common emphasis on the management of the region without external interference
- Common benefits in maintaining stability in Central Eurasia, including against the threats posed from Afghanistan
- Geo-economic necessities of cooperation, including in the field of transit
- The need for cooperation to deal with asymmetric security threats, especially against terrorism, drug trafficking and extremism

Russia in relations with Iran, should pay attention to regional and international importance of Iran and some issues related to it. Here are three issues that can be addressed:

- The main purpose of pressure on Iran is to consolidate US hegemony, US exceptionalism, US unilateralism in international affairs and strengthen its

geo-economic and geopolitical influence in the region. The realization of these goals will damage Russia's interests too.

- Iran is an important element of security and geopolitical systems of the Middle East and Central Eurasia. Any tension to Iran is likely to spread across these two regions and, consequently, Russian borders. The interconnection between affairs in the Middle East and Central Eurasia will double these threats.
- In terms of subjects, for example, on the issue of a JCPOA, in the event of failure of this agreement and its diversion into other scenarios (including war), there will be various regional and international threats and risks, which will affect Russia as well.

With this in mind, opposing to the pressure on Tehran and trying to expand the ties with Iran is a logical choice for Russia. But in addition to the advantages of cooperating with Iran, it should be mentioned that a limited level of the pressure on Tehran and tension between Iran and the West (US) has multi-dimensional benefits for Moscow, including the following;

- Distraction of US focus from Russia and CIS (Ukraine) to Iran
- Increase in the importance of Russia for US as a consequence of US need to Russia to exert effective pressure on Tehran
- Increase in the importance of Russia for Iran's enemies/rivals, including Saudi Arabia and Israel
- Increase in the importance of Russia for Iran, as Tehran needs to a balancing force against US
- Rising oil prices and delaying in Iran's effective entry into global energy market.

Keywords: Iran, JCPOA, Middle East, Russia, Stabilizing Factors, US.

Relations between the European Union and Iran after the United States Withdrawal from JCPOA

Nikita Filin¹²

The Iranian nuclear issue has long been one of the most pressing issues in world politics, but in 2015, after years of arduous negotiations, it was possible to sign an agreement between Iran, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (Russia, Great Britain, China, the USA, France) and Germany, under which the UN, US and EU sanctions on Iran's nuclear program were abolished, that opened the way for Iran's economic growth and trade development. But these achievements were thwarted this year. On May 8, 2018, US President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement signed in July 2015 and the reinstatement of economic sanctions against Iran that will affect American and European companies operating in this country. According to him, "this was a horrible one-sided deal" and it didn't bring calm, it didn't bring peace". He lamented that this agreement could not prevent Iran from making nuclear weapons and launching ballistic missiles. The same day, Trump signed a memorandum to begin reinstating US sanctions against Iran, after which the ministries began to prepare for the return of sanctions.

At the same time, the EU reacted cautiously to this statement. British Prime Minister Theresa Mei, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuelle Macron issued a joint statement in which they stated they would continue to fulfill their obligations under the JCPOA and expressed concern over the US withdrawal from this agreement. The parties called on the USA to act strictly within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 for the Iran's nuclear program. According to them, there are no claims to Iran on the issue of compliance with the agreement. "According to the IAEA data, Iran continues to abide by the restrictions set out by the JCPOA, in line with its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The world is a safer place as a result. Therefore, we, the E3, will remain parties to the JCPOA". EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini also spoke about her concern over the US withdrawal from the agreement. She stated that the agreement with Iran was the outcome of 12 years of diplomatic efforts.

According to Trump's decree, new contracts with Iran were blocked for American companies, a ban on financial transactions and metal trade was introduced since August 6 and a ban on oil trade since November 4. It should be noted that the EU is one of the main consumers of Iranian oil. In addition, the largest companies in European countries (especially

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France) are very active in the Iranian market. For example, French Airbus agreed to supply 100 aircrafts to Iran for USD 19 billion, and French Total SA together with China National Petroleum Co agreed to operate the South Pars deposit for 20 years (the project cost is USD 5 billion). In this regard, the reasons for such great concern of the EU countries with the return of American sanctions are quite clear.

Some leaders of the EU countries have taken concrete measures. French Minister of Economy Bruno Le Maire stated that France would make every effort to protect several dozens of its firms on the Iranian market. He further stated he was dissatisfied with the US desire to play the role of world gendarme, violating international rules, and the EU would oppose American economic pressure. On July 6, 2018, representatives of the Joint Commission for the Implementation of the Nuclear Agreement, which includes Russia, Great Britain, China, France and Germany, at a meeting in Vienna, decided to protect their companies from US sanctions, and to keep the export of hydrocarbons from Iran at the current level. The US government stated later that it would dramatically increase the economic and diplomatic pressure on Iran, which was accused of supporting terrorism in the Middle East. On August 6, 2018, the first part of US sanctions against Iran came into force, operations with this country in the automotive sector and trade in gold and other key metals stopped as a result.

The ban on transactions with Iranian banks was postponed until November. According to senior officials, the US plans is to reduce Iran's oil export to zero, which should cause tremendous economic damage to this country, living off oil export. Sanctions have already born fruit in Iran: the rate of IRR on the black market jumped to IRR 120 thousand for USD 1, and in May it was only 65 thousand. As a result, prices for fuel and essential commodities sharply increased, which led to protests by the Iranians. By that time, some Western companies had already left the Iranian market: French Total and CMA CGM Group, German Wintershall and Adidas, Danish Maersk Tankers, etc., have announced exits Iran. The Iranian authorities, in turn, stated that Iran would cope with the difficulties and refused to negotiate with the US due to the pressure. At the same time, the European Union took active measures to protect its companies – on May 18, the European Commission adopted a set of measures to protect European firms in Iran from US sanctions, and since July 16 it has also begun to impose a blocking regulation that prohibits European companies from implementing US sanctions, allows companies to compensate damage from the actions of third parties through the courts and invalidates all court decisions on the implementation of US sanctions in EU member states.

The procedure for financing European projects in Iran was simplified, and the strengthening of economic partnership, especially in the energy sector, was announced. Measures to prevent the use of dollars in Iran and EU trade are also being considered. In 2016, the EU export to Iran amounted to USD 9.7 billion, and import to USD 6.5 billion that is completely incommensurable with the volume of European-American trade, which amounted to USD 1.1 trillion. Almost all serious European companies act in the US economic and

financial market, and therefore are very vulnerable to US sanctions. The US authorities insist that the companies of their allied countries suspend cooperation with Iran, threatening with consequences. All this led to a decrease in the activity of European companies in Iran. It should be noted the German automobile giant Daimler among those companies that have already suspended work with Iran. The future will show how political upheavals of this year will affect the statistics of trade between Europe and Iran.

Keywords: European Union, Iran, JCPOA, United States, US.

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