



Partners in Defiance: Russia and Iran Move Closer to Alliance

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Russia and The Islamic Republic of Iran have announced the upcoming signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement. Initially, the ceremony was meant to take place in Kazan, Russia where the BRICS summit was held on October 22-24, 2024. But recent reports in the Russian media have indicated that the document will now be signed during a separate visit to Moscow by Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian. Though the date is still to be determined, the two sides are eager to conclude the treaty as quickly as possible. Thus, Pezeshkian's visit to Russia is expected to happen by the end of the year.

The agreement will replace an older version signed in the early 2000s, which was temporarily extended. The initial agreement was more about expanding economic, cultural, and general political ties with less emphasis on security and military cooperation or overall opposition to the collective West. Over the last several years, however, the two sides have determined that new geopolitical realities have accentuated the need for a renewed version of the treaty. The new document is expected to broaden their bilateral relations, which have notably expanded following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Moscow's deteriorating ties with the West.

Though details of the agreement have not yet been disclosed, statements from Russian and Iranian officials in the media have hinted that it will likely include provisions for cooperation in the fields of media, education, space exploration, and cultural exchanges. More importantly, the document will likely reflect both countries' opposition to the Western-led global order and their shared advocacy for a multipolar system. In more practical terms, the treaty will focus on achieving immediate and tangible benefits for both nations, including the

creation of a new payment system to facilitate trade in national currencies. This is an important component for Iran and Russia given their heavily sanctioned economies, which push them to seek greater cooperation through sanctions evasion schemes.

The new document is also expected to cover commercial and investment ties. This is especially relevant as Russo-Iranian bilateral trade dropped from \$4.9 billion in 2022 to \$4 billion in 2023--a decrease of about 17%. Russia had also pledged to invest in Iran's oil and gas industries, promising a \$40 billion investment package during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Tehran in 2022. However, little of this investment, nor high-level trade numbers, have materialized so far. Thus, the document will likely place greater emphasis on the construction of main gas pipelines, implementation of LNG projects, swapping operations with natural gas and oil products, and strengthening scientific and technological cooperation. The issue of Russian investments is linked to the energy sector and the new agreement will likely give Russia priority rights to production in the Iranian section of the Caspian Sea, where large oil and gas reserves are present.

Cooperation on trans-Eurasian connectivity, especially the expansion of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), will be another focal point of the agreement. This corridor, which connects Russia to Iran's southern ports and extends further to India, has become a critical supply route for Russia's military industry and other sectors of its economy. Running through both sides of the Caspian waters and the sea itself, the corridor has been popular throughout the centuries. Indeed, it was through this geographic corridor that Russia and Iran traded from the 16th



century onward when Russian merchants sought connection with India and Persia wanted to export its silk to Europe bypassing parts of the Ottoman Empire.

Wider Context

Iran and Russia are expanding their ties across all spheres of bilateral relations. This is often referred to as alignment. The growing closeness between the two countries is indeed unprecedented as they have historically been rivals and even outright enemies in projecting influence in the Caucasus and the Middle East. Perhaps what makes the present alignment so consequential is that Iran and Russia have not cooperated this closely since the late 16th to early 17th centuries, when the ruling Safavid dynasty of Iran struggled to contain the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. At that time, Iran sought the help of Russia, which had its own concerns over Constantinople's ambitions around the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea.

Another factor that makes the present Russo-Iranian ties particularly special is the present global context. The two countries have a shared view that the post-Cold War era is unjustly dominated by the U.S., which they consider unbridled in its ambitions. In their view, the U.S. is attempting to impose a liberal order against what Tehran and Moscow consider their traditional spheres of influence and more importantly, threatening their autonomy and model of governance. For instance, aversion toward the so-called color revolution has been one of the driving forces behind the Russo-Iranian alignment. Support for existing rulers has evolved into a hallmark of cooperation between the two sides. Syria is a pertinent example of how shared concern about the West's actions in the Middle East in pursuit of stated humanitarian goals, has resulted in a growing coordination of anti-western forces. Yet it was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that largely defined the present

expanding mode of cooperation. For Russia, the pivot toward Asia was never the natural tendency, as the country's geopolitical imperatives, despite their differences, largely pushed it closer to the West. Yet, the war in Ukraine and ensuing Western sanctions drove Russia to seek alternative trade routes and sources of investment, as well as geopolitical affinities. The Middle East and Asia have had it all in store.

Before 2022 Russia was a clear dominant power in the bilateral relations with Iran and it seemed reluctant to advance relations with the Islamic Republic if it meant hurting Moscow's ties with the West. But the war in Ukraine limited Russia's options and Iran suddenly emerged as a critical axis to rely on. Indeed, Tehran was able to supply high-tech weaponry (drones, artillery shells, ammunition, and allegedly even ballistic missiles) and provide Russia with valuable technical training. In another instance, Iran helped Russia deepen its involvement with the Houthis in Yemen, a Shia military group aligned with Iran. The Houthis, who are part of Iran's so-called "Axis of Resistance," have allegedly (as per Western media) received sophisticated weaponry, despite the risk this poses to Russia's relationships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE—two countries that have militarily opposed the Houthis for years.

This Iranian support was reciprocated by Russia. Traditionally hesitant Moscow has become more open to the idea of deeper military cooperation evidenced by a series of deals to supply Iran with Yak-130 training aircraft, Mi-28 attack helicopters, and most importantly, Su-35 fighter jets.

Iran and Russia also think that Western influence is on the cusp of, if not total collapse, then certainly systemic decline, paving the way for (Eur)Asian powers to step in. The rise of Asia and China in particular has been a defining



turn of events for Russia and Iran, giving credence to their thinking that the age of Western dominance has come to an end. The two sides are pushing for a multi-polar world order which will be built around several major powers as chief decision makers. Russia and Iran are also positioning themselves as true civilization states--actors endowed with rich history and a historic right to dominate their respective neighborhoods. It also means that each side respects, and often supports, the other's model of governance as a sure move to prevent the spread of Western ideals.

Both Iran and Russia see the war in Ukraine as a definitive moment leading toward the post-American multipolar global order. The latter is understood through the support of the expansion of non-Western multilateral initiatives such as BRICS, SCO, EEU, and others. In the view of both Tehran and Moscow, these institutions will either push back or replace the Western-led initiatives.

In that context, Iran and Russia have learned how to both deconflict and work with one another. When their differences are palpable and reach a nadir, the two usually manage to decrease tensions. The motivation driving this understanding, however, is not so much pure cooperation as it is adherence to the shared opposition to the collective West and the U.S. in particular. In other words, animosity toward Washington outweighs their mutual grievances. In terms of active cooperation, Tehran and Moscow have resorted to the idea of regionalism, for instance, in the South Caucasus which the two countries both border, in terms of a very peculiar understanding of geography that involves keeping non-regional (mostly Western) interference at bay. This thinking is at the root of the 3+3 initiative which Tehran and Russia eagerly support, and which comprises Turkey and three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, though the latter officially refused to participate).

Disagreements

The fact that Iran and Russia are large and powerful countries intent on fully pursuing their independent foreign policy, however, does complicate the idea of a potential formal alliance between them. It is unlikely that the two sides will become full-fledged allies since both nations traditionally seek to maximize their geopolitical autonomy and flexibility. A formal alliance would deny them this. Instead, Tehran and Moscow will always prefer a looser arrangement allowing them to cooperate on shared goals while maintaining the freedom to pursue their own, often conflicting, interests.

Despite the expanding alignment, Russo-Iranian relations will continue to face challenges, and the new strategic partnership is unlikely to fully relieve existing tensions. Ties between the two sides are increasingly transactional, i.e. the two are less united by common values than by the pursuit of geopolitical benefits that would solidify their regional, and eventually global, posture. Each side benefits from the other's isolation and each understands that the other is weaponizing the alignment to attain concessions from the West.

For example, it has been suggested that the Islamic Republic now is more open to some sort of limited nuclear deal with the U.S. to have sanctions lifted. Though this scenario now seems unlikely given Iran's spiraling confrontation with Israel, Russia is watching closely whether Iran's potentially diversified foreign policy approach could lead not only to the lifting of some U.S. sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy but also to the reduction of the Islamic Republic's dependence on Russia. Similarly, Iran is seen as a tool for Russia to exert pressure on the West, and Moscow's current muted approach toward Iran's nuclear ambitions contrasts sharply with its previous stance on the matter when



the Kremlin was among the staunchest opponents of nuclear proliferation.

Military cooperation between the two nations has also faced complications. Despite promises from Russia, Iran has not yet received the Su-35 fighter jets it has been expecting. Moscow's reluctance may be due to its desire to maintain positive relations with other regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of whom would view the transfer of advanced military hardware to Iran with suspicion. Moreover, Russia has occasionally sided with Iran's regional competitors as was the case when it supported Abu Dhabi's position regarding disputed islands in the Persian Gulf, further illustrating that Russia's alignment with Iran is far from complete.

Russia is also seen as unwilling to go along with Iran when it comes to Tehran's exacerbating rivalry with Israel. The latter has always enjoyed a special relationship with Moscow and Iran remembers well how Russian troops stood aloof when Israeli planes bombed Iranian installations in Syria. Russia was also cautious about providing military support to Iran as it appreciated close ties with the Jewish state. Yet, the invasion of Ukraine, as well as Israel's military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon, have caused major shifts in Russia's posture toward Israel. Differences have grown and Moscow has largely pursued a pro-Palestinian position.

All things considered, Russia is still unlikely to support Iran in its clash with Israel. Direct military participation is out of the question and even though it is theoretically possible that Russia could provide air defense and aviation to Iran to help repel an attack, gaining expertise on how to use them requires a long time (i.e., the S-400 air defense system would need at least three months).

Further complicating the relationship is the issue of regional connectivity. Iran has long

maintained close political and economic ties with Armenia, and it is highly cautious of Azerbaijan's intentions regarding the Zangezur corridor, a transport route that would link Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenia's southernmost province, Syunik on the border of Iran. While Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders have recently suggested that the issue of the Zangezur corridor is no longer part of their ongoing peace negotiations, Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, have continued to push for its development. In August 2023, Lavrov advocated for the opening of the corridor, which drew a sharp response from Tehran. Iranian officials summoned the Russian ambassador to express their strong opposition, stating that any redrawing of borders along Iran's northern frontier would be unacceptable.

Conclusion

Iran and Russia are close to signing a strategic partnership agreement, which, although significant, will fall short of a true alliance due to the complex nature of their relationship. Although the two countries are cooperating, they are still regional competitors when it comes to infrastructure projects and influence across the Middle East. While mutual distrust remains, their opposition to Western dominance in global affairs binds them together, albeit in a relationship that is largely transactional in nature. This means that while the soon-to-be-signed strategic partnership will deepen cooperation in many areas, it is unlikely to qualitatively change the essence of their relationship.

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