Iran and Russia

Elaheh Koolaee, Professor & Director, Regional Studies Department
University of Tehran

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ekolaee@ut.ac.ir

Abstract
Geographical proximity of Russia and Iran has made them expand their bilateral relations during the long time. In the Westerners’ view of Russian foreign policy Iran was evaluated as a centre of Islamic threat. But Eurasianists emphasis using Russian abilities in order to achieve its special goals and ask for an independent approach in the country’s foreign policy. In parallel to developments in Russian Federation foreign policy, Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy also transformed enormously. In this article changes in Russia and Iran’s relationship is discussed.

Key words: Iran, Russia, Middle East, Westernism, Eurasianism, the United States of America
Introduction

Iran-Russia relations have been changed deeply during the last decades. In the Cold War era, Iran belonged to the capitalist camp. But in 1960s and 1970s, Iran’s geopolitics and geo-economic location was the cause of a wide economic relation between the two countries. This relation in the framework of the Soviet Union relations with a third world country was a unique case. After the collapse of the communist regime and the dominant Westerners’ view in Russian foreign policy, Iran was evaluated as a centre of Islamic threat. But very soon “New Eurasianists” emphasis using Russian abilities in order to achieve special goals and ask for an independent approach in Russia’s foreign policy. Based on this view, the importance of Russian relation with its neighboring republics (Near Abroad) was highlighted, and this region was evaluated as a territory of vital interests for Russia.

In parallel to developments in Russia’s foreign policy, Iran’s foreign policy also transformed enormously. In early years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was assumed that with return of millions of Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus and Muslim Russian Republics to Islamic World, there would be a real chance for establishment of Islamic governments across the region. This unrealistic presumption seriously transformed the prospect of Iran, with newly independent Republics. Civil war in Tajikistan and ethnic relation among Tajiks and Afghans created critical regional problems. Domestic developments in these two countries affected other Central Asian countries. Therefore, the constructive role that Iran played in bringing Tajikistan civil war to end highlighted the

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1 Elaheh Koolaee, Soviet Union and Islamic Revolution, (Tehran: Center For Islamic Revolution Documents, 1980).
4 Elaheh Koolaee, Politics and Government in Central Asia, Chapter 2.
importance of Iran’s crucial presence in keeping peace and stability in the region\textsuperscript{7}. Meanwhile, it was realized that there was no chance for expansion of Iran’s model because majority of Central Asian Muslims are Sunnis.

NATO expansion toward East, and serious objection of West to military operations against Chechnya separatists increased the attention on Iran. In spring 1995 Segodnia, wrote: “Cooperation with Iran is more important than economic benefits for Russian atomic industry. Iran as an enemy can provide Muslim insurgents in Northern Caucasus and Tajikistan with arms, money and food; and Iran as our friend, can be an important strategic partner for us. NATO expansion toward East has made us look for a strategic ally. An anti– American and anti- Western government in Tehran can become our natural ally. Pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy, from mid 1990s onwards, became more prominent, that was a sign of increased capacities for expanding ties between the two countries.

Iran’s restrain in regard to Russian suppression of Chechnya separatists sent clear messages to Russian leaders\textsuperscript{8}. Although Iranian officials always were talking about a peaceful settlement for conflicts in the Caucasus, but their supportive stance on Chechnya was the herald of pragmatist dimensions in Iranian foreign policy. The role that Iran played in ending civil war in Tajikistan was a clear indication for Kremlin about its constructive role to expand a multilateral cooperation with Iran. Of course, Taliban victory in accelerating the peace process in Tajikistan was a considerable subject in itself\textsuperscript{9}. In fact, Taliban quick progress which supported by U.S. and Pakistan’s ISI, was a reason that pushed Russian and Tajik Oppositions to end the war. Iranian positive conduct in peace negotiation with Tajik Oppositions was undeniable for Russian leaders. Iran previously had tried to play an effective

\textsuperscript{7} Oliver Roy, the Iranian Policy toward Central Asia, www.eurasianet.org.regional/royoniran/html.
role in Armenian and Azeri’s conflicts in mountainous Karabakh\textsuperscript{10}, which, without Russian harmony was not successful.

**Impacts of Geopolitical Factors**

Iran and Russia as neighbors to Central Asia and Caucasus republics considered their common interests. The geopolitical vacuum, resulted from collapse of the Soviet was filled with different players (11), which created “a new Great Game”. Iran and Russia were searching for social, economic and political interests in these republics. These republics, which were in search of different relations with new partners, are landlocked. This feature has limited their efforts in finding new alternatives in Iran’s northern borders and south Russian’s\textsuperscript{11}. In the light of increasing importance of geopolitics in Russian foreign policy, Russia’s attitude toward the Middle East, especially Iran has transformed, and Iran's importance in Russian foreign policy increased\textsuperscript{12}.

Establishing Shanghai Forum by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is an indicator of Russian attention toward its Eastern borders\textsuperscript{13}. Based on Russian geopolitical concerns, the Middle East regained its status in its foreign policy. Iran’s condemnation of terrorist activities in different parts of Russia had created a proper opportunity for presenting the differences between Islam and terrorist activities.

Russian increasing concerns about NATO expansion toward East, made this relation in light of Iran’s anti-American rhetoric, to be evaluated very important. For Russian expansion

\textsuperscript{13} Mohiaddin Mesbahi, “Russian Foreign Policy and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus”, Central Asia Survey, No. 12, 1993, pp. 210-15
of ties with Iran has become a nationalist sign in its foreign policy. Iran has also looked upon this change and its consequences as an opportunity to reduce western especially U.S. pressure against itself. It is as result of growth of this approach that securing of Russian various interests in Iran has become a foreign policy priority. Washington decision in May 1998 to suspend Iran legally efforts for oil and gas contracts with Total and Gazprom which were signed for exploitation of an Iranian natural gas field, was in fact an indicator of American hostile policy. Iran-Libya Sanction Act (ILSA) which ratified in 1996 in U.S Congress let to serious protests of many American as well as European companies. Any changes in America – Iran relation could have an effect on Iran–Russian cooperation.

Iranian 6th parliamentary election even raised Russian concerns about this matter more than before. Many of Reformists had thought that continuation of Iran-America conflict was not useful for American and Iranian people. But they very soon made it clear that do not have actual intention for a real breakthrough in Iran–America relations. In this manner, Russian continued the productive cooperation with Iran.

**Military Cooperation**

In the light of the new Eurasianist perspective, after China and India, Iran has became the third arm purchaser from Russia. Russia has allowed Iran to produce some kind of the military equipments too. The Presence of a large number of the Russian military advisors in Iran increased while West rejected to supply Iranian arms. Different advanced arms’ systems are among delivered arms and equipments to Iran in order to fulfill Iran’s defense needs. Iran-Russia military cooperation against developing military cooperation of America and

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15 Reinforcement of Eurasianist attitude and emphasis on necessity of expanding relations with Asian countries, especially Middle East and Persian Gulf has been a contemplating subject in this frame work. 16- Stephen Blank. Op.cit., pp. 518 – 17.
Turkey is a kind of cold war era’s stereotypes reconstruction. Expansion of “the New Great Game” in Caspian region has made their military cooperation more prominent\textsuperscript{17}.

Continuation of Iran-America and Israel conflict helped to expansion of their military cooperation. It is noteworthy that Russia and Israel have also experienced multilateral developing cooperation\textsuperscript{18}. Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement was cancelled by Vladimir Putin,\textsuperscript{19} and paved the way of expanding their military relations. Russia tried to play role in modernization of Iran’s military forces. Iranian military forces access to Russia’s advanced military systems providing them with an opportunity to satisfy their needs. It has been one of the most important concerns of the West\textsuperscript{20}. Of course, Russia has always defined this cooperation as a fulfillment of Iran’s defense needs based on the international commitments\textsuperscript{21}.

**Nuclear cooperation**

Confrontation of Russia and America, especially in regard to completion of Bushehr nuclear power plant, which none of the Western countries did not made any help, has entered a new phase. Russian officials have always emphasized on controlled and peaceful nature of Iranian activities\textsuperscript{22}. Russia has denied all the allegations about production of ballistic missiles for Iran. US officials have always repeated their allegation about Iran's aims to complete Bushehr power plant with the help of Russians in order to access to nuclear weapons\textsuperscript{23}. Some of the Russian experts attribute US pressure to economic losses of America in this project. From their perspective, Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran is the same of American

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Oksana Antonenko, “Russian Military Involvement in the Middle East”, Meria Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 2001, p. 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Army Myers, Jaffe & Robert Manning”. The Myth of the Caspian Great Game, the Real Cooperation of Energy”, Survival, Vol. 40, No. 4, winter 1993 – 99, pp. 115 – 122.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} See: Elaheh Koolaee, Reasons and Consequences of Israel and Russian Relation Expansion, (Tehran, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tehran, 2004).
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Oksana Antonenko, Op.cit., p. 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Robert O. Freedman, "Putin and Middle East", International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research, p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 3-5.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Alan Gersh, Op.cit., p.196.
\end{itemize}
nuclear cooperation with North Korea, which have been promised by America instead of an end to its nuclear program. For Russians, Iran's readiness to international inspections has always been an indicator of her transparent conduct in this domain.\(^{24}\)

However continuous cooperation of Iran with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been continued.\(^{25}\) U.S. and Israel have always voiced their concerns about completion of Iranian missiles technology.\(^{26}\) Contrary to noticeable expansion of military cooperation between two countries, Russian secretary officially called these information leaks about technology exports very detriment to Russian security.\(^{27}\) Afterwards, Russia have always emphasized on its commitments on this matter. Israel and Russian Relation have always expanded in Post-Soviet era and presence of one million Russians in Israel have created proper capacity for their relation.\(^{28}\) Russian officials in regard to these allegations have always rejected them.

For Russia, Iran is a country that could play a positive role in Russian’s Middle East policy. Some of American exports believe that Russia is using Iran as a buffer zone against America.\(^{29}\) In a C.I.A report in the same year, Russia was accused of helping Iranians to achieve nuclear technologies for their military goals.\(^{30}\) In respect to Russian economic needs, this kind of cooperation could provide Russia with a better opportunity at the bargaining table with America.\(^{31}\) Slow process of Bushehr power plant construction is a good indicator of their non-confidential conduct toward ending this project. Russia clearly is pursuing Mini-max policy in regard to Iran: increasing its influence on Iran, and at the same time reducing its negative effects on US-Russia relations.


\(^{25}\) This Issue has been expressed by Russian official in response to American attacks.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Robert O. Freedman, Putin and Middle East, Op. cit. pp. 3 – 4


\(^{29}\) Robert O. Freedman, Policy Brief, 12 June 2003, Middle East Institute.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 10
**Economic cooperation**

Contrary to military-political cooperation between Iran and Russia, their economic cooperation and business extrados, in spite of noticeable capacities, has not increased. Russia possesses advanced technology and skilled experts in different fields, but has not fully taken advantages of these capabilities. Their technical cooperation has been more focused on military aspects\(^{32}\). Although Iran-Russia's economic and technical ties developed, but did no reach to its proper level. Both countries’ experiences in these fields brought them considerable achievements\(^{33}\).

However since 1997, economic relations of Iran-Russia have expanded.

Their bilateral trade volume indicates that they have huge capacities for cooperation in their bilateral economic relations. Cooperation of littoral cities of the Caspian Sea with Iran also increased too. Many meetings of local and national Iranian officials with Tatarestan, Kalmickia and Astarakhan officials set the goals for more regional economic cooperation between them. Both countries supported the idea for a separate organization –OGEC– to set policies for gas production. Their cooperation in gas and oil sector has become directly connected to Caspian Sea affairs. In airplane manufacturing sector, and its related branches, cooperation of both countries in regard to fulfillment of Iranian industries’ needs have reach attractive dimensions.

**The Caspian Sea Issues**

In the Soviet era, its relation with Iran in the Caspian Sea was based on 1921 and 1940 treaties\(^{34}\). But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Caspian Sea became the arena of a new

\(^{32}\) This is a point that has been criticized by Russian officials in bilateral talks in different levels. Experience of economic–technical cooperation in 1960s, 1970s is a referable point.


\(^{34}\) Mohammad Esmael Norian, “Different Perspectives about Caspian Sea Legal Regime”, Caucasian and Central Asia Studies, No. 14, summer 1375, pp. 105 – 126.
"Great Game". Multinational oil companies in the hope of access to vast energy resources in this region, which was generously estimated at about 20-30bn barrels of oil, began their efforts. Regional countries in search of necessary international supports, and in order to protect their interests against Russia, encouraged the penetration of their influential supporters into the region.

First both Iran and Russia had emphasized on sharing exploitation of the Caspian resources. But very soon Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan tried to pave the way for other great players’ entry into the region in order to reduce Iran and Russia's influence. In 1988, Russia and Kazakhstan reached a separate agreement on the division of Caspian line along their boarders. So Iran remained alone in emphasizing on the preservation of the legal regime. Russians repeated this deal with Azerbaijan in 2001. Iran protested against these agreements and called them illegitimate. Establishment of a committee in the 6th parliament for monitoring the process of formation the new Caspian legal regime is in fact a symbol of Iran’s concern in this regard.

In Eshghabad Summit in 2002, Turkmenistan government tried to impose: an imaginary Husseyngholy-Astara line on Iran. Russia declared a military maneuver following this summit that made political experts to interpret it as confrontation of Iran and Russia. Kazakhstan which had always followed very careful and sensitive relations with Russia also called for continuation of the negotiations. However, Eshghabad Summit showed that the" Great Game" in the Caspian Sea is very complex.

9/11 attack in U.S. in fact, made Russia and America closer together in the war against terrorism. Iran’s foreign policy framework which basically was based on confrontation with

36 Lutz Kleveman, the New Great Game, WWW.guardian.co.uk/oil/story/0.11319/1.66600.00.html.
38 Robert O. Freedman, ”Putin and the Middle East”, International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research, html, p.3.
39 This committee was consisted of Elaheh Koolaee, Hassan Ghashghavi, Kazem Galali, Members of Foreign Policy and National Security Commission, Islamic Parliament.
U.S. provided regional rivals with proper ground, especially in the arena of the new "Great Game" in Caspian Sea. Iran is the only country in the world that can provide straight path for the Caucasus and Central Asia Republics’ access to world free waters, and this is a point that has a negative effect on Russian exclusive interests in making access for these republics. Russia is not happy with this communicative role of Iran, but has preferred the expansion of US influence in this region. Russia, since the Soviet era, have benefited from its transit role in providing connection between Caspian region republics with world markets.

Shifts in transit paths and finding new trade partners which could reduce Russian influence have been one of important argument in the Post-Soviet era. There is no doubt that Russia doesn’t prefer this trend, but expansion of Iran influence has been evaluated less costly than western rivals’. The issue of gas and oil pipelines for transferring the region’s energy has been one of the important arguments related to the Caspian legal regime. Russian traditional route could lead to revival of its influence among region republics, something unfavorable to US and Europe. Eastern route toward China is a very long and expensive one, and southern route Iran have always been rejected by America that has supported a very highly expensive Baku-Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.

**Tehran Summit**

In October 2007, at the time of the second meeting of littoral states of the Caspian Sea, Putin paid a visit to Tehran, and very soon Russia starts delivery to Iran of 82 tones of enriched uranium needed to start operating the Russian- built nuclear reactor at Bushehr. This visit was the continuation of recent Russian foreign policy toward Iran. The main Iran-Russia disagreements remains in their relations have been over the United Nations Security Council.

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41 Ibid.
42 American efforts in preventing Iran from playing a role in connecting Central Asian Republics together at least as a communication alternative have imposed heavy costs on these Republics. The Great Game dimensions also have added to these costs.
43 These changes are directly related to shifts in Commonwealth of Independent States affairs and return of ambassador - who was in this post for two terms – to Iran and operations in this office.
UNSC action over the nuclear activities in Iran. It was very surprising for some Iranian officials that Russia did voted to refer the Iranian nuclear dossier from IAEA to the Security Council and then supported its Resolutions against Iran. Moscow appears to have motivated to take each of these steps by at least three factors:

- the growing fear that Iran was indeed trying to acquire nuclear weapons,
- the desire to be seen by Western governments as upholding the international nonproliferation regime,
- the expectation that Iran would surely become more amenable to Moscow’s wishes through realizing how dependent it was on Russia to protect Iran from the imposition of more UNSC sanctions.45

While Iran had long declared the right to enrichment its own uranium for its civilian atomic energy program, the US and others opposed it because they claimed that Iran would enrich its uranium beyond commercial grade to weapons grade level. Russia had proposed resolving Western concerns about this issue through enriching uranium for Iran to commercial grade in Russia. Some officials in Iran expressed their positive understanding of this policy. But there were deep pessimism about Russia’s intentions in Iran.

Conclusion

Iran-Russia's relations went through a period of Westerners domination in Russia foreign policy, which later gave its place to New Eurasianist perspective. The New Eurasianist perspective paved the way for improvement of their relations. This trend has steadily expanded. Iran’s foreign policy after independence of the Caucasus and Central Asian Republics emphasized on pragmatism, economic-social cooperation with them. Iran-Russia's cooperation in ending the war in Tajikistan was indicative of Iran's constructive role to insure

Russian security needs. The effective capacity of Iran in Russian military considerations in the Caucasus repeated.

Taliban rule and the emergence of a common enemy in Afghanistan opened the way for more political-military cooperation between them. America’s efforts to create a hegemonic order in the world, has made Iran and Russia closer to each other. U.S. efforts to contain Russia in its borders, and widening the gap between America and Russia have reinforced this trend. In spite of increasing Iran-Russia’s military-political cooperation, economically they have not taken full advantages of their real capacities. Although their nuclear cooperation has reached a higher level, but in this field also political concerns have prevailed too.

However, extension of American presence in Central Asia, after the collapse of Taliban regime in Afghanistan, has created new challenges for Russia. This unacceptable policy of U.S. in turn helps the expansion of Iran-Russia relations. But the Caspian Sea unresolved problems about exploitation of its resources, has became an obstacle in two countries’ relations, and ignoring Iran’s interests will have a negative impact on this relations. Iran and Russia share a common confrontation toward the United States. They have different outlooks and goals. Although their relation has been improved, but the American factor has a very influential role in this regard. Russia’s policy in UNSC has damaged there relations seriously. There are many negative memories in the history of the two countries relations. Their disagreements have been increased over nuclear issue, completion of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, natural gas and oil, energy transition from Caspian Sea basin and its delimitation.