
# Iran's Russian Conundrum

## By Alex Vatanka

### Summary

Following Russia's decision in September 2015 to intervene militarily in the Syrian war, speculation has been rife in Washington that President Vladimir Putin's ultimate end-goal is to eclipse America's long-held dominance in the Middle East. To that end:

- Moscow needs regional allies that can abet its ambitions.
- At least in American eyes, no other state can be more useful to Russian machinations than the ardently anti-American Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Given the fluid state of geopolitics in the Middle East—defined by ongoing conflicts in a number of theaters and uncertainty among US partners and allies about Washington's commitment to the region—the question of Iran as a conduit for Russian ascendency is both timely and proper.

That said, Iran's checkered history with the Russian Federation since 1991 informs that while Tehran and Moscow have common interests at times, the path toward a possible strategic partnership is bound to be long and arduous at best.

### Historical Context

One might believe that Iran and Russia today enjoy a semblance of "strategic cooperation." Defenders of such grand assertions most often point to the ongoing joint Iranian-Russian military campaign to keep Syria's Bashar al-Assad in power. In reality, Russian and Iranian officials have labeled their bilateral relations "strategic" as early as the dawn of the 1990s. It was then, during the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, when major defense and economic agreements were first announced.

In other words, those championing closer Iranian-Russian ties will argue that this so-called fraternity did not begin in Syria in 2015 but that it came to a climax in that Arab state's civil war: at that point, Tehran and Moscow's interests dovetailed to a great extent. Even assuming that the Iranian-Russian partnership has been gradually in the making since the early 1990s, it still does not amount to an untroubled relationship. And signs of trouble were evident from the earliest of days after the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Moscow desperately was seeking to rekindle its relations with the outside world.

The principal example of that was arguably the secret June 1995 agreement between Vice President Al Gore and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, which stipulated Moscow to end all military sales to Iran by 1999.[1] When the Iranians found out about the secret pact between Washington and Moscow years later, a sense of perplexity hit Tehran given the years of overtures they had made to the Russians. Then–Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had personally prioritized Russia as a new anchor for Tehran's foreign policy. Within about two weeks of becoming president in late June 1989, he visited Moscow as his first international trip. Besides the significant symbolisms of the gesture, Rafsanjani had traveled there with high hopes and with concrete goals in mind.[2]

Following the death of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in June 1989, Rafsanjani was eager to quickly put an end to the previous decade's isolation, which had been overwhelmingly brought about due to Tehran's own revolutionary intransigence and its commitment to export its Islamist model. And with Khomeini's death coinciding roughly with the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan in early 1989—an occupation that had mobilized much of the Islamic world against Moscow—Rafsanjani should have been forgiven for believing the timing for a new chapter in relations with Iran's northern neighbor was ripe. Tehran's later deep disappointment in finding out about the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement has to be seen in this context.

The Russians have always measured this Iranian anger mostly through the financial losses it subsequently incurred on Russian exporters. Still, from Russia's perspective, Moscow should be forgiven for wanting to prioritize its ties with the United States—which has long maintained a policy of seeking Iran's isolation—against Tehran's high hopes for what Russia could do for Iranian fortunes. As *The Moscow Times* put it, Russia's relations with Tehran "took a backseat to the post-Cold War reconciliation between Russia and the US."[3] In the process, Russia not only lost about $4 billion in unfulfilled military contracts to Iran, but the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement left behind a deep sense of mistrust among Iranian officials. Over the following decade and half, three other issues further deepened this distrust in Tehran.

First, the Russians were seen by the Iranians to deliberately be holding up the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power reactor, which had been awarded to Moscow in a 1995 contract. The project was not a golden goose for Moscow as such. The Iranians believed this Russian delay was partially due to Western pressures on Moscow but also stemmed partly from an assessment in Moscow that delaying the completion of Bushehr kept Iran's nuclear program alive as a controversy. This would in turn prolong Russia's role as a mediator and give it the global eminence it craved. More specifically, the Iranians correctly believed that Moscow was playing

its Iran cards as it balanced its interests with Western states and particularly as a way to extract concessions from Washington elsewhere in their bilateral relations. After repeated delays, the Bushehr nuclear plant was finally operational in September 2011, about ten years after the original deadline and with a number of contract cost increases in between.

Second, the Russians had first agreed in 2007 to sell Tehran a number of S-300 anti-air missile systems. In 2010, however, President Dmitry Medvedev banned the sale, which compelled the Iranians to bring a $4 billion lawsuit against Russia at the International Court of Arbitration in Geneva.[4] The psychological fallout from this episode is perhaps the most significant. Tehran's $800 million purchase of the sophisticated air-defense systems—one of the biggest single arms deals the Islamic Republic has ever signed—had come at a time of intense American signals that Washington might unilaterally strike Iran's nuclear facilities. The S-300 systems were meant to be an answer to Iran's prayers for an impenetrable defense shield. Medvedev's sudden ban again signified to the fidgety Iranians that Moscow was a fair-weather friend at best. Russia was certainly proving reluctant to be perceived as the guardian of an Islamic Republic that, at the time, insisted on pushing ahead with its questionable nuclear ambitions.

Third, the Russian stance during the international negotiations to find a solution to Iran's controversial nuclear program also created an impression in Tehran of Russian equivocation. Over a four-year period, from June 2006 to June 2010, Russia voted to sanction Iran at the United Nations Security Council on six occasions for its nuclear activities.[5] Not once did Russia abstain or veto sanctions against Tehran at the UN. The Russians let the irritated Iranians know that, each time, they had been frantically watering down the punitive impact of the sanctions on Iran behind the scenes. This was Russia's rationale for its actions at the UN, but Tehran has never openly accepted this Russian explanation. The heyday of Russian support for international sanctions on Iran came after the arrival of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Iran not only had restarted nuclear enrichment in April 2006[6], which it had suspended in 2004, but Ahmadinejad's bombastic approach to international affairs—including labeling the Russians "good cops" when the US ostensibly played the "bad cop" in subduing Iran—did little to please Moscow.

Put simply, the above-mentioned examples sit at the heart of today's Iranian mistrust in Russia as a partner. As one member of the Iranian parliament put it in 2010, "No other country has wronged Iran as much as Russia."[7] These kinds of sentiments are regularly expressed by Iranian officials and commentators. If nothing else, the Iranians have been guilty of mismanaging their own expectations about Russia as a potential partner. As a shortcoming, harboring unrealistic goals is a phenomenon that has impacted the highest levels of power in Tehran.

**False Strategic Premises vs. Tactical Advantages of Cooperation**

Nearly 20 years after President Rafsanjani paid homage to Moscow in a bid to turn Russia into Iran's guardian—and despite the fact that Tehran has had a very mixed record to show for it—the country's most powerful figure took another gamble on Moscow. In January 2007, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is the ultimate authority in Tehran, told a visiting Igor Ivanov, the head of the Russian Security Council, that Tehran wanted to form a "strategic alliance against common adversaries" and proposed that the two countries share between them

responsibility for the future of the Middle East and Central Asia. A month later, Khamenei dispatched his top foreign policy advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, to Moscow with a detailed plan to brief Putin himself. Meanwhile, there was no Russian response as such.[8]

Putin was in Tehran in October that year to attend a security conference by the states of the Caspian Basin. It was the first time since 1943 that a Russian leader had been in Tehran.[9] And yet there was still no sign of a Russian receptivity to Iranian overture that were continuing to come from the highest power in the byzantine system of the Islamic Republic. Instead of contemplating an implicit pact with Tehran, the Russians were at the time more concerned about what they believed to be lack of Iranian cooperation to find a resolution on Iran's nuclear program.

And more importantly, at the heart of this conundrum lies an implicit Iranian call that Moscow should effectively side with Tehran in rolling back American power in the Middle East and Central Asia, whenever possible. Moscow was not prepared to entertain such Iranian ambitions since Russian interests—and hence the need to have a working relationship with the United States—go well beyond Asia's western regions. Not even major dips in Russian-Western relations—such as heightened tensions following Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008—altered this basic coolness Moscow displayed toward Tehran's call for a united anti-American front.

The uneasy twists and turns in relations, however, should not be the only barometer. On a tactical level, where Iranian and Russian interests have overlapped in regard to narrow policy objectives, the track record of cooperation has been much brighter. Immediately after the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, Tehran and Moscow became de facto partners in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Pakistani and Saudi-backed Taliban movement in the Afghan civil war. In the 1990s, Tehran and Moscow were also largely on the same side in the civil war in Tajikistan. This fact was also true in the case of Russia and Iran both wanting to counter Turkish inroads in the South Caucasus, where Ankara was backing Azerbaijan in its conflict against Armenia, which was backed by Tehran and Moscow.

Overall, the Iranians have been careful not to upset Russian interests in the former Soviet South, a zone Moscow jealously labels and guards as its "Near Abroad." Perhaps most notably, Iran—as a large Muslim state—played a highly accommodating role in the context of Russia's two bloody military interventions in suppressing a national movement in Chechnya, Russia's most rebellious Muslim-populated republic. Whereas there was much condemnation in the Islamic world of Russian actions in Chechnya, Tehran used its chairmanship of the Organization of Islamic States (OIC) to basically provide a cover for Moscow.

As the then Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi put it, Iran was merely ready to "collaborate with Russia to establish stability in the North Caucasus, including Chechnya."[10] This position hardly amounted to a censure of Russia, a step that pleased Moscow but tarnished Iran's image as a self-declared defender of Muslim rights on the international stage, a role Tehran has been loudly touting since 1979.

Nonetheless, in Tehran's calculations, the cost-benefit analysis was straightforward and Iran was not about to irk Moscow over the Chechen question. Also around this time, in the early 2000s, Russian commentators started to frequently refer to Iran as Moscow's most important ally in the Middle East.

One can argue that Tehran has viewed the Russian question and role in much bigger terms than just as a provider of arms and technology or as the occasional geopolitical ally or, conversely, even as a Christian-majority state with a complicated set of relations with its own Muslim minorities or its Muslim neighbors to its south and east. At its core, Iran has been judging Russia also as an important building block in the anti-Western global front that the Islamic Republic so desperately has wanted to see emerge to challenge the Western-dominated international system. Even though Iran's experiences with Russia on this matter have not always met Tehran's expectations, it would be wrong to ignore "anti-Westernism" as a partial driver in their bilateral relations.

The idea of constructing a new set of international norms that reflect the practices, worldview, and aspirations of the ruling authorities in Tehran is as old as the Islamic Republic. In its earliest days, the revolutionary theocratic government targeted both the US and the Soviet Union. The one slogan that epitomized this sentiment was "No to the East [Soviet Union]; No to the West [United States]; [But only the] Islamic Republic." It was a coarse attempt to catapult Khomeini onto the world stage, though the concept was itself hardly worked out in detail even by its bickering supporters in Tehran. By Khomeini's death, the Islamic Republic was no longer aspiring to change to the world. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) had exhausted the revolutionary fervor. Tehran was further disillusioned by its failure to capture the imagination of the masses in the Islamic world.

Instead of seeking to export its model, Tehran's pursuit of the alternative norm continued only as an effort to enhance the Islamic Republic's legitimacy. It was in this framework that other political systems outside the Western orbit—the "Russias" and the "Chinas" of the world—were identified by Tehran as fellow travelers in a crusade to push back against the global mainstream norms the West had systematically advocated since the end of the Second World War. From recasting the conventional principles of human rights and political participation, to launching alternative international media, and working to reshape and restrict access to the Internet, Tehran's effort to manipulate counter-norms began to move ahead and continues to go on unabated. In the course of these efforts, it has been seeking global partners that share its agenda. Tehran found Moscow to be useful role model, facilitator, and collaborator.

Today, President Putin and Ayatollah Khamenei probably agree that the very notion of "democracy" is an undesirable Western concept. In the case of Iran, Khomeini and later Khamenei have insisted that "Islam itself is democratic" and proceeded to define democracy the way they have deemed fit to serve their narrow political interests but cast as a defense of the country's national interests. Despite one being a Shiite Muslim theocracy and the other an Orthodox Christian revisionist power, the Iranian Islamists share the same antipathy toward the Western liberal model as do the top officials in the Kremlin; and both are equally alarmed by Western intentions.

Moreover, while on the global stage Tehran's assertion that Iran is an "Islamic democracy" is unpersuasive at best inside the country; yet, this has never prevented the Islamic Republic from seeking to assert its values on the global scene. As is evident from the frequent public speeches of Khamenei himself, Iran does so on the pretext of defending local non-Western cultural values. In the course of promoting substitutes for democratic norms, the authorities in Tehran frequently attack the accepted standards of human rights—a particular weak spot of the Islamic Republic. And instead of withdrawing from international human rights bodies, where it comes under criticism, Tehran has rather wanted to reshape those very same institutions. In order to do so, Tehran has looked to form tactical partnerships with like-minded countries in order to confront Western norms. Again, from Tehran's perspective Russia fits the bill as a like-minded companion on this journey.

Iran has already seen the fruits of such investments. For example, when the UN Human Rights Council voted, in March 2014, to renew the special rapporteur's mandate to investigate Iran's record, 21 states supported the motion, but nine opposed it. Among the nine that came to Iran's aid were Russia, China, Cuba and Venezuela. In another revealing example, from October 2014, Russia—along with countries such as China, Syria and Cuba—refrained from censuring Iran's record at the UN Universal Periodic Review of Tehran's compliance with basic human rights standards. By now, it has become routine for Tehran to rely on sympathetic states in such forums.

In most cases, Iran's ties with other non-democratic states first developed as a way to satisfy material needs and gain geopolitical support aimed at countering the country's isolation as instigated by the United States. Although these remain key priorities, Iran is now also seeking to form alternative blocs within international forums, and it views like-minded non-democratic countries as collaborators in this quest. Tehran's courting of other revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, therefore rests on two pillars—material needs and diplomatic cover. First, this approach seeks to meet Iran's basic economic, military and trade needs given that its behavior at home and abroad has made Western states wary of dealing with it. One example of such a policy is Iran's trade relationship with China. Trade between Iran and China increased from $4 billion in 2003 to $36 billion in 2013, making China Tehran's biggest trading partner by far. More recently, in the aftermath of Russia's falling out with the West over the crisis in Ukraine in early 2014, Tehran and Moscow have penned numerous economic agreements although bilateral trade remains small. Still, the driver is unmistakable and is aimed to circumvent troublesome Western states that are at loggerheads with Iran and Russia, albeit for different reasons.

Second, forging ties with other revisionist powers provides Tehran with a diplomatic comfort zone and a claim to international inclusion, even if it fails to convince the West. For example, Tehran has earnestly sought to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a six-member bloc led by Russia and China that touts itself as a counter to the West. Iran currently has observer status in the organization. The Iranians see the SCO as another mechanism to negate Western-led pressures. More recently, Iran's expressions to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are rooted in the same basic calculations in Tehran.

Furthermore, as is evident elsewhere in the fields of defense and nuclear cooperation, not all of Iran's dealings with revisionist powers such as Russia rest on symbolisms only. Plenty of

evidence can be found of other tangible cooperation. For example, Iran—which in 2003 became the first country to prosecute a blogger—works closely with Russia and China in the field of surveillance technologies and cyberspace monitoring. In 2010, Iran's largest telecommunications firm purchased a "powerful surveillance system capable of monitoring landline, mobile and internet communications"[11] as part of a $130 million contract with a Chinese company. The deal was signed only a few weeks after the European Union (EU) decided to impose restrictions on the sale of communications equipment to Iran following Tehran's crackdown on the Green opposition movement in the summer of 2009.

If Iran shares with Russia a common interest in regulating cyberspace as a purportedly defensive strategy against Western machinations, it also shares with Moscow an equally strong desire to go on the offensive in the realm of international broadcasting. Tehran has long considered this arena worthy of investment in order to counter the influence of Western broadcasters such as the *BBC* and *Voice of America*. The launch of Iran's 24-hour English-language *Press TV* in 2007 followed two years after Russia's *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) was launched in 2005. The *modus operandi* is simple: They defend Iran's policies and those of its allies, while criticizing Western policies. The programming on both stations includes a pervasive questioning of the basic international norms of political and human rights.

Overall, despite the many ups and downs in bilateral relations since 1991, Tehran finds Russia to at a minimum share its intrinsic opposition to what they both perceive to be Western diktat. It is why the Iranian government—an Islamist regime that claims to be carrying out Allah's wishes on Earth and preparing the ground for the coming of the Mahdi (the Messiah)—counts among its most treasured foreign partners an atheist China and a Russia led by Putin, a self-declared champion of Christianity. It is not a common set of values that brings them together, but rather the desire to preserve their own power and to limit their sense of isolation in the international arena. If there is a succinct way in which to describe the goal of such alliances, it is what has been aptly called the doctrine of "democracy containment."

As mentioned above, this approach has already brought Russia and China to Iran's aid in UN human rights forums, and Tehran is eagerly pursuing membership in the SCO, an organization whose outlook on political and human rights mirrors that of the Islamic Republic. Joining forces with the SCO and with states such as Russia and China at least offers Ayatollah Khamenei's system (*nezam*) a means of avoiding global ostracism. For sure, given the dissimilarities that exist between Iran and its international partners, few in Tehran presumably expect a real strategic partnership to emerge from their country's cooperation with its revisionist allies. Yet, a common bond of sorts is arguably in the making.

**Crimea and Arab Spring**

On the question of Russian and Iranian collaboration in the Middle East, a number of developments in the last five years are significant. There was the 2012 return of Putin—seen by many as a Eurasianist who comes with a big dose of skepticism about Western intentions—to the presidency. In Tehran, the Russians perhaps welcomed the departure of the irksome Ahmadinejad, who was succeeded by the moderate hand of Hassan Rouhani in 2013. But there can be no doubt that two particular events—the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 and Russia's

annexation of Crimea in 2014—are the key factors that have boosted the Iranian-Russian fellowship in the Middle Eastern theater.

Russia, fearful that the West, via its pro-US Arab allies, was going to emerge as the winner from the Arab upheavals, quickly recognized that they shared a deep common interest with Iran in wanting to keep al-Assad in power in Damascus. It was, however, after the West imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its 2014 annexation of Crimea, that Moscow deployed military assets to Syria in defense of al-Assad.

But as has been evident elsewhere in the relations, even this Iranian-Russian compact about Syria has not been without hiccups. While the Iranians welcomed the Russian military presence on the ground in Syria, a suspicion that Moscow could at an opportune moment undercut Iran's interests in Syria—by for example reaching a separate understanding with the US or Turkey—has been pervasive in Tehran. Such nagging doubts have only been further fueled by unilateral Russian actions. For example, Moscow announced, in January 2016, that it was pulling out of Syria in a step that most likely was not coordinated with the Iranians. Later, and as the Russian withdrawal did not materialize, Moscow unilaterally revealed that it was using an Iranian airbase for its operations in Syria. This was hugely embarrassing to Iran given that the Islamic Republic's constitution bars the use of its soil by foreign militaries.

The Russian indiscretion led to much anger in Tehran. Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan summarized it best when he called the Russian action a case of "betrayal." Meanwhile, the Iranians continue to monitor Russia's Syria agenda nervously. On the one hand, they are tactical partners—as manifested via joint military actions on the ground in Syria as well as through such joint sponsorship as the Astana round of peace talks about the future of Syria. And yet, it can only trouble the Iranians that Moscow has a freer hand than Iran in seeking to cut deals with an array of other actors—such as the Americans, the Turks, the Israelis and even Tehran's arch regional rivals, the Gulf Arabs. As *Kayhan*, the Islamic Republic's equivalent to the Soviet *Pravda*, put it, "Iran did not make so many sacrifices and offer so many martyrs in Syria for five years to allow it to become a chip in a deal between Moscow and Washington."

It goes without saying that the Russians too have misgivings about Tehran's game plan. President Rouhani's persistent overtures to the West since 2013 have created doubt in Moscow if the Iranian regime as a whole is still serious about the kind of strategic alliance that Ayatollah Khamenei had touted back in 2007. A mirror fear exists in Moscow that Iran is using its Russia cards in its own geopolitical haggle with the Western powers. It goes beyond geopolitical calculations. The Rouhani government's conspicuous preference for Western goods and services is a sore point in Moscow. In one telling case, a Russian minister canceled a trip to Tehran in anger over Iran's bias for Boeing and Airbus over Russian-made aircraft.

**Conclusion**

The Islamic Republic's ideological commitment to compete with the United States in the Middle East and beyond has certainly been a major geopolitical boon for Moscow since 1979. It is a reality that in effect weakens Iran's hand—as Tehran's stance on the US is a non-starter for a majority of the states in the region that enjoy close ties with Washington—and compels the

Iranians to turn to Russia for a host of military, economic and diplomatic requirements. And yet, some quarter of a century after the fall of the Soviet Union, Iranian opinions on Russia vary greatly.

When it comes to the generals from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)—the political-military guardians of the Islamic Republic and Moscow's principal Iranian collaborators in the Syrian war—one will mostly hear praise vis-à-vis Russia. These are the stakeholders in the Iranian state that speak of a "strategic overlap" of interests with Moscow in everything from combatting Sunni terrorism to rolling back American power in the Middle East. Still, even among such pro-Russia voices in Tehran, the relationship is not always easy to justify, as was conveyed by Defense Minister Dehghan's statement about Russian "betrayal."[12]

Even the limited tactical partnership with Moscow is not cost-free. The IRGC, which portrays itself as a revolutionary Islamic force, was tellingly silent throughout Moscow's military campaigns in Chechnya. For the IRGC, it is the flow of Russian arms, intelligence cooperation and other practical benefits that Moscow offers that make it a special partner. If Iran's Islamist credentials take a dent in the process, so be it. Meanwhile, the IRGC's key rival inside the Islamic Republic, the moderate government of President Rouhani, has a far less rosy view of Russia, and it is not beholden to Moscow as a transactional partner as is the IRGC top brass.

The Rouhani team has since 2013 largely looked at the new US-Russian cold war following the fallout from the annexation of Crimea as an opportunity to push its own agenda—not as an opportunity to move closer to Moscow per se, but to play the Russia card as a way to prod Washington to reassess its overall posture toward Iran. Indeed, on the question of Russia, one can detect a genuine difference of opinion between the elected president and the unelected Supreme Leader Khamenei. After his tepid visit to Tehran in 2007, Putin returned once more to Tehran in November of 2015. Here he gave Khamenei an ancient manuscript of the Koran as a gift.[13] By then, Russian troops were fighting alongside Iranians in Syria and a case for a strategic alliance—as Khamenei had first brought up in 2007—was considerably stronger. At best, however, Putin's November 2015 trip to Tehran reflected continuity in relations, and there has been no public sign of an emergence of deeper strategic convergence since.

Rouhani's key goal is the transformation of the Iranian economy, and his elected government recognizes the United States as a pivotal obstacle that one way or another has to be placated. For them, Russia does not have the financial or technological edge to be a game-changer in the beleaguered Iranian economy. And while it is good to have Russian support for when the next time Iran's human rights record is up for a vote at an international forum, the Rouhani team's preoccupation is not diplomatic symbolism but real renewal of the Iranian economy. The IRGC generals do not share this view, and claim legitimacy based not on how many jobs they can create, but on their military prowess in the many conflicts around the Middle East.

Nonetheless, both camps in Tehran quietly agree that Russia has historically taken far more from Iran than it has ever contributed to its national interests. In recent years, the Russians upset the Iranians to no end by voting repeatedly against Tehran's nuclear file at the United Nations; by deliberately delaying the completion of the Bushehr nuclear plant in order to use Iran as a pawn in Moscow's broader talks with Washington; and by systematically absorbing Iran's global oil

market share when the country was under sanctions. And yet, for the hardliners in the ranks of the IRGC and elsewhere in the Iranian regime, the Rouhani government's proclivity to favor the West over the East is more ominous.

They see Rouhani as a man who might look to cut more deals with Washington at the expense of the influence and agenda of the hardline camp. Moscow's ability to find a way to fly its bombers out of an Iranian airbase has to be seen in the context of this power struggle in Tehran. From Washington's perspective, the question is whether this Iranian-Russian cooperation poses a fundamental and long-term threat to US interests in the Middle East. America has had plenty of time to ponder this question. Iran and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement in January 2015, which has so far been met by little response of any kind from Washington. The United States might see this mounting Tehran-Moscow axis as a cursory build-up. That is not necessarily how US allies in the Middle East will see it, and that alone should matter to Washington.

---

**ENDNOTES**

[1] John M. Broder, "Despite a Secret Pact by Gore in '95, Russian Arms Sales to Iran Go On," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/13/world/despite-a-secret-pact-by-gore-in-95-russian-arms-sales-to-iran-go-on.html?mcubz=1.

[2] "The Shadow of Mistrust in Iranian-Russian Military Relations," *Radio Farda*, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f8-iran-russia-military-cooperation/26864535.html.

3 Matthew Bodner, "Mistrust Dogs Russia-Iran Arms Talks as Shoigu Heads for Tehran," *The Moscow Times*, January 19, 2015, https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/mistrust-dogs-russia-iran-arms-talks-as-shoigu-heads-for-tehran-43011.

4 "Russia & Iran reach agreement on S-300 air defense systems delivery – deputy foreign minister," *RT*, August 19, 2015, https://www.rt.com/news/312804-russia-iran-s300-delivery/.

[5] See time-table: https://www.globalpolicy.org/security-council/index-of-countries-on-the-security-council-agenda/iran/49102.html.

[6] See time-table: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/custom/2006/01/17/CU2006011701017.html.

[7] See http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/101428/%D9%87%D9%8A%DA%86-%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B8%D9%84%D9%85-%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%87.

[8] Mark Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Spring, 2008, pp. 202–216.

[9] "In Iran, Putin Warns Against Military Action" http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/17/world/middleeast/17iran.html?mcubz=1.

[10] Shireen Hunter, "Islam in Russia: The Politics of Security and Identity" (ME Sharpe, 2004).

[11] Steve Stecklow, "Special Report: Chinese firm helps Iran spy on citizens," *Reuters*, March 22, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-telecoms/special-report-chinese-firm-helps-iran-spy-on-citizens-idUSBRE82L0B820120322.

[12] Dehghan comes from the ranks of the IRGC.

[13] "From Putin To Khamenei: A Koran Copy With Its Own History" November 23, 2015 https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-khameni-koran-russia-iran-history-islam/27382730.html.