

Russia *vis-à-vis* Iran

Witold Rodkiewicz

Russia's relations with Iran are almost entirely based on geopolitical assumptions. Both states are interested in weakening the position the United States holds in the region; both have a common enemy in the form of Sunni extremism. Combined with the successful cooperation in Syria, which is not devoid of elements of rivalry, these priorities make Russia and Iran strategic partners in the Middle East.

Iran in Russia's Middle Eastern strategy

• Relations with Iran in the context of Russia-US relationships

Russia approaches its relations with Iran as a part of a wider geopolitical game with the United States, with its main objective being the attempt to find an optimum balance between three conflicting goals. The first goal involves maintaining and preferably strengthening Russia's 'strategic partnership' with Iran. The second consists of avoiding confrontation with the United States and minimising the adverse consequences of Russian-Iranian cooperation for relations between Moscow and Washington. The third and least important goal involves preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, or at least delaying this process. The second goal has recently been substantively modified. In the situation of an escalating political confrontation between Russia and the United States, the goal of Russian politics is to avoid an open military confrontation with the US and its main ally in the region, i.e. Israel.

Russia's 'strategic partnership' with Iran is mainly based on the common interest Moscow and Tehran have in curbing the power of the US. Tehran, for its part, is predominantly interested in the regional dimension of this power,

whereas Moscow is also interested in its global aspect. According to Vladimir Sazhin, one of Russia's leading experts on Iran, "it cannot be ruled out that Moscow's priority interest lies in the fact that Tehran's policy is largely anti-Western, both in its global and regional aspect".

For Iran, Russia is the only source of both weaponry and nuclear technologies. Moreover, due to its right to veto in the UN Security Council, it is capable of protecting Iran against Washington attempting to use UN mechanisms to increase UN pressure on it. Russia sees Iran's policy in the post-Soviet area as an important element of the 'strategic partnership'. Not only did Tehran avoid rivalry with Moscow there, but it also loyally cooperated with it (see the support Iran offered to the pro-Russian leadership in Tajikistan and Armenia and the fact that it distanced itself from Chechen separatism).

Alongside this, Russia was using its cooperation with Iran to strengthen its bargaining position towards the United States, by suggesting to Washington that it would be ready to limit its contacts with Tehran at a specific price. The most evident manifestations of Moscow's instrumental approach to Iran was its support in 2010 for a UN Security Council resolution regarding sanctions against Iran, and its partial embargo on arms exports to Iran in 2010.

This was intended as reciprocal move in exchange for the cancellation under Barack Obama's administration of the original plan to deploy elements of the US's ABM shield in Central Europe, together with the signing of the new START treaty, which are of key importance for ensuring Russia's strategic parity with the United States.

- **The significance of the Middle East for the Russian foreign policy**

Russia's policy in the Middle East is part of a wider strategy aimed at creating an international order which would shield Russia against Western interference in its internal affairs. Such an order should also enable Russia to have a key voice in determining political-military arrangements (regional orders) in regions adjacent to the post-Soviet area. That means that Russia's Middle Eastern policy is subordinated to the Kremlin's global strategy towards Washington, while at the same time Russia seeks to create in the Middle East a regional variant of what it believes to be the best model of the international order, i.e. a concert of powers that would include, apart from Russia, the regional powers of Turkey, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as the United States (provided the latter gives up its 'hegemonic habits'). At the same time, the Kremlin's striving to restore Russia's great power position in the Middle East was intended to serve to legitimise Putin's regime in the eyes of both the Russian elite and Russian population at large (and to a certain extent continues to do so).

From Moscow's point of view, the Middle East is divided into two fundamentally different zones. The first one consists of Turkey and Iran, and the second one consists of the Arab states and Israel. Turkey and Iran are adjacent to the post-Soviet area and are the Russian Federation's neighbours across the Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins. The two countries have long traditions of imperial statehood, major

economic and military potential, and growing regional ambitions. Both also have sufficient resources to effectively compete with Moscow for influence in the post-Soviet states, and even use soft power measures to influence followers of Islam and ethnic compatriots within the Russian Federation. The other zone does not directly neighbour the post-Soviet area and none of the countries that constitute it have sufficient potential to effectively aspire to regional power status. Because of those differences, Russia's policy towards each of the zones is based on different assumptions.

Russia's Middle Eastern policy is subordinated to the Kremlin's global strategy towards Washington, at the same time Russia seeks to create a regional order based on the model of a concert of powers.

Turkey and Iran are seen in Moscow as serious geopolitical players and relations with them feature high on Russia's political agenda. Moscow treats the two states as regional powers and views them as its partners in building the 'multi-polar' international order (at least in the regional dimension) and in stabilising the post-Soviet area.

Moscow tends to treat the states making up the second zone (the Arab states and Israel) as an instrument. This is due to the fact that they are located at a greater distance from the post-Soviet area, have more modest geopolitical ambitions (Israel) and less impressive capabilities (Saudi Arabia). In its relations with them, Moscow mainly focuses on collaboration in important, albeit rather narrow areas of interest (Israel – high technology, avoidance of military incidents in Syria; Saudi Arabia – coordination of oil market policy).

- **The Syrian context of Moscow's relations with Tehran**

The rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran over the Syrian issue could be observed back in 2011 in connection with the two countries' similar assessment of the Arab Spring. Both Moscow and Tehran saw the upheavals as a US-inspired potential threat to both their internal orders and their geopolitical positions in the Middle East. Both feared that the Arab Spring could lead to a strengthening of the United States in the region or an activation of radical Sunni movements. For Iran, that would also entail a strengthening of Saudi Arabia, its main geopolitical rival in the region.

The rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran over the Syrian issue was triggered by the two countries' similar assessment of the Arab Spring.

Another important date in the development of Russian-Iranian relations was September 2015, when Russia launched its direct military intervention in Syria in order to salvage the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which was trying to suppress a military uprising backed by Sunni kingdoms from the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates), Turkey and the United States.

As a consequence, both Iran and Russia became involved in defending the Assad regime in Syria. When Russia launched its military intervention in the autumn of 2015, Moscow and Tehran became de facto allies in the war, which was an internal conflict in Syria but also a regional and global conflict between foreign powers supporting the different sides in the Syrian civil war. The intervention was preceded by at least several months of military consultations as part of which General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who was in charge

of coordinating Iran's military support for the Assad regime, visited Moscow in July 2015. This resulted in an unprecedented intensity of political contacts between Russia and Iran.

- **The relations with Iran in the context of Russia's Middle Eastern policy**

The political relations between Russia and Iran are an intertwined nexus of both common and divergent interests. The common interests seem to be prevailing, at least from Moscow's point of view. Russia and Iran have converging interests in limiting the presence and influence of the United States in the region, as well as in bringing about the final victory of Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war and in legitimising this regime in the international arena. However, even in Syria the Iranian-Russian alliance is not lacking elements of competition, in terms of influence over the Assad regime and of various tactical differences. In the end, both sides seem to assume that they are fated to cooperate in Syria.

What complicates Russian-Iranian relations are the relationships with the remaining major actors on the Middle Eastern political scene. Iran is in sharp conflict with Israel, which is of fundamental importance for both sides and which in fact is a low-intensity undeclared war. Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a sharp ideological and geopolitical rivalry in which Saudi Arabia is backed by the majority of Sunni kingdoms from the Arabian Peninsula. Russia, for its part, is interested in maintaining good relations with Israel. In recent years, it has also made attempts to improve and tighten its relations with Saudi Arabia. Generally speaking, in its policy in the region, Russia intended to nurture good relations with all the major actors while simultaneously remaining neutral in the devastating conflicts and disputes present in the region (with the obvious exception of the Syrian conflict). Russia openly stated that it is not a party to the Shia-Sunni religious dispute and called on the representatives of the two branches of

Islam to engage in dialogue and seek a peaceful modus vivendi. Similarly, it distanced itself from the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Persian Gulf and called on the two sides to alleviate the tension by creating a regional dialogue mechanism to include all the interested parties.

Although in Syria Russia has convergent interests with Iran, in certain situations Moscow has cooperated with Ankara against Tehran.

Russia took a similarly neutral stand regarding the war between Israel and Iran that was waged mainly on the Syrian territory. In the autumn of 2015, after the launch of its military intervention in Syria, Russia accepted the Israeli proposal to create a mechanism for preventing incidents between the armed forces of the two states in Syria. This enabled the Israeli air force to hit Iranian targets in Syria without the risk that it might itself become a target for Russian anti-aircraft defence systems deployed in Syria. The Russian side, for its part, tried to take into account Israel's arguments regarding the limitation of the presence of Iranian forces and pro-Iranian militias in the part of Syria which is adjacent to Israel. In the summer of 2017, Russia backed the offensive of the Syrian government forces against the units organised by anti-Assad opposition, which had controlled this portion of the Syrian territory. At the same time, it assured Israel that in the cross-border zone (which, according to several media reports, included a strip of land along the Israeli-Syrian border reaching 50-85 km into the Syrian territory) no Iranian troops and pro-Iranian militias will be allowed to operate (according to Israeli media, Russia has failed to keep this promise). Although on the one hand Russia tolerates the strikes carried out by the Israeli air force in Syria, on the other it evidently limits this air force's freedom to act. This was particularly ev-

ident when in September 2018, during an Israeli air strike, the Syrian anti-aircraft defence mistakenly shot down a Russian military plane. The Russian side blamed Israel for the incident, called on Israel to limit the number of strikes and offered Syria a relatively advanced anti-aircraft defence system S-300 (the delivery of which it had previously suspended to meet Israel's demands).

The Turkish context is equally important for Russia's relations with Iran, particularly regarding Syria. A tripartite consultation mechanism involving the three states has been in place since 2016 to coordinate and harmonise their actions in Syria (where the three of them have a military presence). Although Russia has more convergent interests in Syria with Iran than with Turkey (Russia and Iran support Assad and his attempts to regain control of the Syrian territory as a whole, whereas Turkey is hostile towards Assad and would like to maintain a buffer zone in Syria that would be controlled by anti-Assad units), in certain situations Russia cooperated with Turkey against Iran. For example, the Russian side cooperated with Turkey in the evacuation of opposition forces from Aleppo and the creation of a Turkish-controlled buffer zone in the Idlib province.

Russian-Iranian bilateral relations

• The political relations

Over the last five years, there has been an evident deepening of Russian-Iranian political contacts. Each year, President Vladimir Putin holds three to four meetings with the Iranian president, both along the bilateral formula and during multilateral meetings. The fact that President Putin organised meetings at the Kremlin for Iran's Vice-President Ali Akbar Velayati (in 2015 and 2018) confirms that these relations are important for the Russian side. Foreign ministers also hold regular meetings. The two states hold regular consultations between deputy foreign ministers. Other high-ranking

officials responsible for maintaining frequent contacts with Iranian diplomats include Mikhail Bogdanov, Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East, and Aleksandr Lavrentev, the Russian President's special envoy to Syria.

- **Russia and Iran's nuclear dossier**

Russia is not interested in Iran acquiring nuclear weapons but at the same time it is not ready to sacrifice its relations with Tehran to prevent it. It treats this issue as an instrument of leverage and assumes that Iran acquiring nuclear weapons is merely a matter of time and that these weapons will pose no threat to Russia.

Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergey Rabkov admitted that Moscow joined the process of negotiations of the multilateral agreement regarding Iran suspending its production of enriched uranium (the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JPCOA, signed in 2015), when it saw that Tehran and Washington were determined to conclude this agreement and that Russia's possible attempts to sabotage it would have damaging consequences for Moscow's relations with both states. This is very meaningful.

At present, Moscow is positioning itself as a hard-line supporter of maintaining the so-called JPCOA agreement and a fierce critic of Washington regarding the latter's decision to withdraw from the deal.

At present, Russia is positioning itself as a hard-line supporter of maintaining this agreement and a fierce critic of Washington regarding the latter's decision to withdraw from the deal. Russia has also been an active participant in diplomatic actions intended to convince the remaining signatories (which, aside from Iran, include Germany, France, the United Kingdom and China) to remain in the deal. It has called on the European Union to create a mechanism

to circumvent the economic sanctions the United States imposed on Iran following Washington's withdrawal from the deal. The Russian side has not launched any specific measures regarding this issue and stated that it was waiting for the results of actions carried out by the EU (the creation of a special mechanism to enable financial transactions with Iran that would circumvent the US's financial system and would not expose companies that do business with Iran to American sanctions).

- **Economic cooperation**

The intensity of economic cooperation between Russia and Iran has remained relatively low, despite the stated intentions of both sides and repeated efforts made by economic ministries within the Russian government. Moscow hoped that Russian companies could benefit from the absence of competition from Western businesses kept out by Western sanctions (which Russia did not officially recognise) and build a strong position in the Iranian market, yet this turned out to be a miscalculation. In reality, despite mutual efforts and declarations, Tehran and Moscow did not manage to shield their economic relations from the impact of the Western policy of sanctions. Neither the signature, in November 2014, of a new contract for the construction of two more units at the Bushehr nuclear power plant, worth an estimated US\$ 10 billion, nor the Russian pledge in November 2015 to grant Iran a loan of EUR 5 billion for the implementation of investments by Russian companies, have had much impact. As a consequence, bilateral trade, which had been worth around US\$ 4 billion a year in the period between 2001–2010, shrank to a mere US\$ 1.2 billion in 2015.

It was only after the Western sanctions were lifted in the aftermath of the entry into force, in January 2016, of the international plan to freeze the Iranian nuclear programme that Russia and Iran were able to deepen mutual economic cooperation. Moscow and Tehran then

signed a number of deals, including on the mutual protection of investments, the avoidance of double taxation and the facilitation of customs and visa procedures (visas were abolished for organised tourist groups). In July 2016, Russia allocated EUR 2.2 billion (out of the 5 billion loan promised in 2015) for the construction of a heat and power plant by an affiliate of the Russian state-owned Rostec and the electrification of Iran's railways by Russian Railways.

The intensity of economic cooperation between Russia and Iran has remained relatively low, despite the stated intentions of both sides.

Those efforts bore fruit in the form of a rapid increase in the volume of total trade, which grew by 85% in 2016 (it was particularly significant in the context of the overall shrinkage in Russia's trade in that period). However, in 2017, total trade, and especially Russian exports to Iran, plummeted again and, as a consequence, the volume of trade fell by more than 20% (including Russian exports, which fell by more than 30%). Figures for the first ten months of 2018 indicate that the volume of trade remained low, as the sustained decline in Russian exports could not be compensated by a significant increase in Iranian exports of over 40% (since this increase started from a very low level). As a consequence, in 2013 trade with Iran accounted for 0.5% of Russia's total foreign trade, whereas in 2018 the figure was a mere 0.2%.

The fate of the idea to organise a barter agreement of Iran's oil for Russian industrial products, which was intended as a tool to help Iran circumvent Western sanctions, testifies to the scale of difficulties hindering the development of economic cooperation between Russia and Iran. The two countries signed a memorandum for that purpose in August 2014, but it was only in May 2017 that Iran announced the conclu-

sion of concrete transactions, the volume of which was nonetheless five times lower than had originally been envisaged (100,000 instead of 500,000 barrels of oil per month). According to the Russian side, the supplies were launched in November 2017, then they were quickly suspended and resumed in September 2018. These volumes are negligible and have no impact on economic relations between the two states.

The problems present in the process of negotiating the agreement on free trade between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union, which was announced with much fanfare in 2014, may serve as an indirect confirmation of the difficulties Russia and Iran have in harmonising their economic interests. After four years of negotiations, only a partial agreement was signed for five years covering around a half of total trade exchange.

• **Military cooperation**

Since the early 1990s, Russia has been a major supplier of weapons to Iran including a wide range of equipment: from tanks and armoured personnel carriers, through anti-aircraft defence systems (S-300, Tor), to combat aircraft and submarines. In 2010–2015, Russia partially suspended the supplies due to the sanctions regime that was in force at that time. Joint military operations in Syria carried out since 2015 required Russia and Iran to develop contacts between the two countries' militaries and security services. In January 2015, defence ministers of the two states signed a cooperation agreement providing for joint exercises, contacts between command structures, as well as exchange of intelligence. Two shared centres for the exchange of military information and coordination of operations were established in Baghdad and Damascus. Over the last couple of years, naval forces of the two states have carried out frequent joint exercises in the Caspian Sea and Iranian officers were invited to participate in drills organised in Russia. Military-technical cooperation was resumed: in April 2015 President Putin annulled a decree issued

by President Medvedev in 2010 which imposed a ban on the export of anti-aircraft defence systems. As a consequence, at the beginning of 2016 Russia supplied Iran with the first batch of S-300 anti-aircraft systems (the signed contract provides for the supply of four battalion sets). One meaningful symbol of how close military relations between Russia and Iran was the consent issued by the Iranians in August 2016 for the Russian bombers to use the Hamadan Airbase in Iran to carry out bombings in Syria.

- **What can we expect from Russia's policy towards Iran?**

In a situation of continued major tension in Russia's relations with the United States and persistent differences between Russia and the European Union, Moscow will continue to seek to maintain and strengthen its relations with

Iran. It seems that at present the resumption of the policy Moscow followed in 2008–2010 is not feasible. It involved Russia abandoning its pro-Iranian policy in order to achieve a 'reset' in its political relations with the United States.

The present growing differences between Russia and Turkey on how to resolve the conflict in Syria and the increased intensity of Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria will force Tehran and Moscow to further tighten their cooperation. The situation in Afghanistan, where both countries have an interest in minimising the US's presence and are ready to launch talks and work out agreements with the Taliban, will also contribute to further rapprochement.

Generally, Russia will continue to treat Iran as its strategic partner because there is more that unites the two countries than divides them.

The text is an extended and updated version of a fragment of 'OSW Studies' on Russia's Middle Eastern policy. See Witold Rodkiewicz, *Russia's Middle Eastern policy. Regional ambitions, global objectives*, December 2017;

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2017-12-22/russias-middle-eastern-policy>

EDITORS: Adam Eberhardt, Marek Menkiszak,

Anna Łabuszewska, Katarzyna Kazimińska

TRANSLATION: Magdalena Klimowicz

CO-OPERATION: Timothy Harrell

DTP: Bohdan Wędrychowski

The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities

Centre for Eastern Studies

Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw

phone: +48 | 22 | 525 80 00

e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

Visit our website: www.osw.waw.pl