

INSIGHTS

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Iran's Bilateral Relations in the New Eurasian Context



In partnership with



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Iran's Bilateral Relations in the New Eurasian Context



Editor's Introduction

Iran has traditionally been perceived as a Middle Eastern country enmeshed in a regional security dilemma. But in many respects, this is a 20th century conception of the country and the determinants of its foreign policy, which presupposes a unipolar order and the dominant influence of the United States over the bilateral relations of Middle Eastern states.

As Europe and Asia grow closer and the rapid growth in economic exchanges over the last two decades necessitates the creation of a new, tentative political order, it is no longer sufficient to see Iran as a state in the Middle East. Rather, the drivers of Iran's bilateral relations with European and Asian nations alike are increasingly "Eurasian" in their dimensions, shaped by both emerging economic trends and the political pressures of a multipolar continent.

In October 2019, the Middle East Institute (MEI) at the National University of Singapore and Bourse & Bazaar commissioned this collection of essays aiming to examine Iran's relations in their "Eurasian context". While much has been written in recent years about the ways in which new projects — chief among them China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and the India-backed International North–South Transport Corridor — recall historical models of exchange such as the "Silk Road", the Eurasian context is in fact quite new in several important respects.

During the course of this project, a novel coronavirus swept across the world, emerging in Wuhan, China, and spreading quickly to the Italian region of Lombardy and the Iranian capital of Tehran. Notably, the vectors of the virus were Eurasian. While the essays in this edited volume do not deal with the impact of the virus directly, the analyses they present is all the more timely

as Covid-19 appears to be accelerating the political and economic re-ordering of the international system that was already underway.

The virus has had an enormous impact on global politics and economics, accelerating the nascent processes of “de-globalisation” that were the result of resurgent nationalism and protectionism, particularly in the West.¹ The seemingly inexorable order erected on the foundation of American political, economic and military primacy, and advanced through the twin processes of political liberalisation and economic globalisation is now faltering.

While Eurasian integration will still require a commitment to international co-operation and cross-border flows of goods, people and capital, such activities may continue within the context of a new “regionalisation”, which is presented as an explicit rejection of the globalisation which privileged the transatlantic axis. The new Eurasian context fits comfortably with the outlook of Iranian strategic thinkers, who have long argued that Iran belongs not to the Middle East, but to “West Asia”, a liminal space between Europe and Asia.

As explained in an address by Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, at MEI’s conference on US–Iran tensions held in August 2019, when looking to West Asia, one must “accept” that Iran is a “genuine regional power”.² It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that the idea for this edited volume was first discussed following the conference, where the focus on US–Iran relations saw eminent speakers struggling to adequately capture the full dynamics of Iran’s outsized role in global politics, amplified as it were by its Eurasian dimensions.

I have been fortunate to commission these essays from among my peers, a generation of young analysts and scholars who are attuned to the recent changes in the syllabus and whose own writings are helping to drive that change. The seminal, if problematic, work of political scientists such as

¹ Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, “Will the Coronavirus End Globalization as We Know It?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-16/will-coronavirus-end-globalization-we-know-it>.

² Lim Wei Chean, “Iran will use all means to defend itself”: Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister,” Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 15 August 2019, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Kazem-Sajjadpour.pdf>.

Anthony Cordesman or historians such as Bernard Lewis principally conceptualised the Middle East as a strategic challenge for the US, and more broadly, the West. Yet, the examination of any country's bilateral relations with the US, once sufficient to understand the place of that country in a whole global order, is each day proving too narrow a lens through which to examine political and economic realities. As Bruno Maçães has argued in his writings on Eurasia, with the erosion of the unipolar order giving way to something messier, more fundamental contexts, underpinned by geography and historical ties, have found new salience.³ Hence, the examination of Iran in the new Eurasian context presented here.

Taken together, the six essays in this volume communicate three important lessons about Iran's political and economic relations in the new Eurasian context. First, the examination of Iran's bilateral relations through a Eurasian lens makes clear that contrary to the dominant conception of Middle Eastern geopolitics, the US is an increasingly peripheral actor in the region. This realisation is perhaps most clear in **Mehran Haghirian's** contribution to this volume (page 6), which focuses on Iran's relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The essay describes how Iran and the GCC kingdoms have "been in a struggle to achieve some sort of balance of power in the Persian Gulf region" and, in the face of American retrenchment, "must now also take into consideration the web of relations each has with players in Eurasia".

Similarly, **Daniel Amir's** perceptive essay on Iran–Israel relations (page 16) highlights the underappreciated ways in which both countries are emerging from the unipolar order dominated by the US. As Amir writes, Israel and Iran "find themselves sharing ground in an expanding Eurasian arena", adopting surprisingly parallel approaches to balancing in an environment that is "less weighted by American leadership". During his May 2020 visit to Israel, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had two items on his agenda: co-operation with Israel to contain Iran, and American concerns over Chinese investment in Israel. No doubt, greater Chinese influence in Israel will have an increasing bearing on policy towards Iran.

³ Bruno Maçães, *Dawn of Eurasia* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

Second, the essays in this volume make clear that the political and economic integration of Eurasia will probably continue even as the world turns away from globalisation. The processes of Eurasian integration are compatible with the conceptualisation of the Eurasian landmass as a series of overlapping “neighbourhoods”. This fact is most clearly understood in two essays which chart Iran’s relations with countries that lie outside of what we traditionally conceive of as the “Middle East”.

Nicole Grajewski’s essay (page 27), drawing on her novel research on the place of Iran in Russian conceptions of international relations, challenges the prevailing view of increased Russian involvement in the Middle East as anomalous, and instead contextualises their involvement within a long-established conception of Russia’s neighbourhood — the “near abroad” — that has been revitalised to underpin the Kremlin’s Eurasian ambitions. Moreover, writing on the state of Iran–China relations, **Jacopo Scita** (page 40) describes how Iran’s pivotal role in the “West Asia Economic Corridor” envisioned in China’s Belt and Road Initiative offers the country a “renewed political and economic centrality” following four decades of relative isolation enforced by the US.

Nonetheless, the third lesson is that the old order will not go quietly — the US still looms large in some of the analyses presented here. This is most obvious when looking at the trajectory of Iran’s bilateral relations with two American allies: the European Union and India. **Sumitha Kutty**, an expert on Iran–India relations, describes the troubled development of the port of Chabahar in Iran and the ways in which India’s own Eurasian vision has been hampered by American resistance to any role Iran might play in the port’s development plans (page 50).

Similarly, **Axel Hellman** describes the ways in which Europe’s own belated Eurasian turn has been driven by the increasingly deep divide with the US over Iran policy following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018 (page 61). Hellman writes: “No experience has been as important in terms of affecting European strategic thinking as the standoff over the international nuclear agreement struck with Iran.” European policymakers increasingly see the underlying political and economic logic of pursuing greater and more functional ties across Eurasia

and have been led to see American policy as a liability in regard to European sovereignty in enacting those plans.

The six essays in this volume are meant to offer a new perspective on Iran, its bilateral relations and its place in the world. They each represent a small glimpse into the scholarly works, policy research, and media commentary of the authors, who are the early chroniclers of the emergence of the new Eurasian context. But we should not expect easy answers from this growing body of work. As Grajewski cautions: “The very notion of ‘Eurasia’ itself is not only geographically porous but also historically, culturally and civilisationally amorphous.” It is precisely this “ambiguity” that offers the “broad political, economic and cultural frame” that not only makes it possible for Iran and other Eurasian states to assert their “centrality” in the emergent order, but also enables studies such as the one presented here.

Ambiguity may make for uncomfortable analysis. Yet, after decades of treating the centrality of the US in the global order as an unambiguous fact, particularly in Middle Eastern policymaking and especially in the misguided efforts to isolate Iran, perhaps it is time to embrace the creative and constructive opportunity presented by the new and ambiguous Eurasian context.

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The Rivalry Between Iran and the GCC States in the Eurasian Context



Mehran Haghirian

Abstract

Iran's deepening partnerships with Russia and China and renewed ties with the European Union since the signing of the Iran nuclear deal have given the GCC states added reason to expand their own co-operation with these Eurasian players. The GCC states were already looking increasingly towards Eurasia for their security and economic needs, concerned that the US "pivot to Asia" was effectively an American retreat from the Persian Gulf region. The resulting scramble between Iran and the GCC for influence in Eurasia is likely to continue to affect the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf region for decades to come.

Iran does not view itself as a Middle Eastern country; instead, it views itself as a West Asian country. In recent years, it has reformulated its foreign policy strategy, taking advantage of its geostrategic position at the centre of the wider Eurasia to go beyond its pure focus on regional security and catch up with the fast developing political and economic trends in this multipolar continent. Likewise, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — have come to realise that they cannot be left out of the growing trend towards co-operation and partnerships in Eurasia. Consequently, in developing their respective foreign policy strategies, Iran and the GCC member states, having long been in a struggle to achieve some sort of balance of power in the Persian Gulf region, must now also take into consideration the web of relations each has with players in Eurasia.

Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf

Iran's engagements with Western Europe and especially with the United States have long been limited owing to its policy of non-alignment. Also, Iran has been subjected to nuclear-related sanctions for several decades. This isolation compelled Iran to prioritise relations with countries in Eurasia, notably Russia and China. However, the 2015 signing of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has had serious repercussions for the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf. Since negotiations for the agreement began two years earlier, the Eurasian signatories — China, Russia and the three European Union members, the United Kingdom, France and Germany (or E3) — have been renewing their ties with Iran. It must be noted, however, that although one foreign policy camp in Iran seeks to expand relations with the EU, as well as China and Russia, Iran's decision-makers seem more inclined towards the other, more powerful camp, which is wary of the EU and calls for focusing on relations with countries in the east of Eurasia, specifically Russia, China and India.¹

While most of the GCC countries openly welcomed the Iran nuclear deal, it became clear that some — particularly Saudi Arabia — were concerned that the subsequent removal of a number of multilateral sanctions on Iran and the country's re-integration into the international community could affect the balance of power in the region.² The GCC states have traditionally relied on the US as well as Western Europe for their security and forged military and economic partnerships with these players. They have since realised that overreliance on the US for their security needs is no longer a viable policy option. The American "pivot to Asia", which was accelerated during the Obama administration, coupled with the growing energy independence of the US, added to the GCC states' "worries that Washington has downgraded the [Persian] Gulf region and that the pivot is really a

¹ Abdolreza Farajirad, former Iranian ambassador to Norway, Hungary and Sri Lanka, and associate professor of geopolitics at the Faculty of International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran, in interview with author, 26 January 2020.

² David Kenner, "Why Saudi Arabia hates the Iran deal", *Foreign Policy*, 14 November 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/14/why-saudi-arabia-hates-the-iran-deal/>; William Hartung and Ben Freeman, "The Saudi Lobby's Scheme to Destroy the Iran Deal", *The American Conservative*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-saudi-lobbys-scheme-to-destroy-the-iran-deal/>.

retreat”.³ The Trump administration’s policies have not assuaged those concerns. Consequently, the GCC states have been expanding their bilateral as well as multilateral relations with countries across Eurasia. They have established security arrangements with countries such as Turkey, France and the UK, even allowing some of these players to set up military bases in the Arabian peninsula. In addition, some GCC states have begun to look to Russia for their arms supplies.⁴

The GCC states have realised that overreliance on the United States for their security needs is no longer a viable policy option.

The enhancement of Iran’s relations with Russia and China in the post-JCPOA era, which significantly increased Iran’s influence across the region, gave the GCC added reasons for expanding their own relations with these powers. Farajirad notes that the scramble by the GCC states to expand relations with Russia and China involved “enticing them with large investments and trade deals” and was intended to “limit Iran’s influence and strategic partnerships with these countries”.⁵

Although the GCC was established in the midst of the Iran–Iraq war in 1981 with the objective of bringing “weak and vulnerable like-minded states under a single protective umbrella”,⁶ it does not have a common foreign policy; each member state has its own understanding of its national interests and charts its own foreign policy course. In this context, it must be emphasised that the GCC states do not have a monolithic view of Iran. While Iran has had an outstanding relationship with Oman, its relations with Saudi Arabia

³ Abdullah K Al Shayji, “The GCC–US Relationship: A GCC Perspective”, *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2014), <https://mepc.org/gcc-us-relationship-gcc-perspective>.

⁴ Luciano Zaccara, expert on Iran and the Persian Gulf Region and assistant professor at Qatar University, in interview with author, 27 January 2020.

⁵ Farajirad, interview.

⁶ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, “GCC Foreign Policy: From the Iran–Iraq War to the Arab Awakening”, in *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States* (Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, April 2015), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/61772/1/The%20new%20politics%20of%20intervention%20of%20Gulf%20Arab%20states.pdf>.

and Bahrain have witnessed more hostility than amicable interactions. Iran's relations with Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, on the other hand, have oscillated, depending on external circumstances and the different factors that shape their bilateral relations. Iran and Qatar, for example, share the world's largest gas field in the Persian Gulf; Iran and Kuwait have transnational connections that predate the Islamic revolution in Iran and the creation of the GCC; and the UAE has had, until recently, the largest trading relationship with Iran and is host to one of the largest Iranian expatriate communities in the region (and the world). These factors have been instrumental in each of the GCC countries' decision-making calculus vis-à-vis Iran and are a major reason for the lack of a unified GCC policy towards the Islamic Republic. Thus, rather than aiming for one another's annihilation, Iran and the GCC states are taking their rivalry to the Eurasian arena to secure their respective interests.

The frictions within the GCC itself have also contributed to the growing differences in their individual foreign policy approaches. Notably, the June 2017 land, sea and air blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain (as well as Egypt) on fellow GCC member Qatar for its alleged involvement with terrorist organisations, among other reasons, has called the continued existence of the GCC into question. The blockade forced Qatar to rely on Iranian airspace and shipping routes, constituting a blow to the objectives of Saudi Arabia and the other blockading countries.⁷ Moreover, as Iran and Turkey — another key player in Eurasia — became the two central actors facilitating the post-blockade food and goods markets in Qatar, the three countries signed a transportation pact in November 2017 to boost trilateral trade and ensure the smooth transfer of goods to Qatar through Iranian territory.⁸ As a result, the blockade has led to a significant shift in the balance of power in the region, with Qatar diversifying its foreign relations and seeking new strategic partners in Eurasia, which in turn has prompted the other GCC states to do likewise.

⁷ Mohammed Sergie, "Embattled Qatar is rich enough to get by for another 100 years", Bloomberg Business, 6 June 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-06/a-year-later-iran-is-the-big-winner-of-the-qatar-embargo>.

⁸ Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism", Chatham House, 13 September 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/iran-and-gcc-hedging-pragmatism-and-opportunism>.

Relations with the European Union

The signing of the JCPOA and the removal of sanctions against Iran paved the way for the EU, especially the powerful E3, to normalise ties with Iran and develop them in a way that had been inconceivable before. Businessmen, corporate executives and tourists began rushing to Iran. Led by the E3, the EU soon initiated a new approach to Iran that has endured despite strong pressures from some GCC states, Israel and the US under Donald Trump. Concerned that they were being sidelined because of these real and perceived new partnerships between Iran and the E3, the GCC countries mounted a reinvigorated effort to elevate and strengthen their own partnerships with the E3 and other European countries.

The E3, and the EU in general, are keen to have a balanced approach in dealing with Iran and the GCC states, but this has not always been possible, considering the rivalries and differences between the Persian Gulf littoral states. As two regional blocs, the GCC and the EU have had several multilateral forums for economic co-operation and strategic partnerships, including the annual GCC–EU Joint Council and Ministerial Meetings, which were strengthened as EU–Iran relations intensified. However, the Economic Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the GCC, signed in 1988, has still not yielded the much sought-after free trade agreement between the two blocs.⁹ Nevertheless, the EU was the largest trading partner of the GCC states in 2018, accounting for 14.6 per cent of the latter’s total trade. More significantly, while the total trade in goods between the EU and the GCC amounted to €143.7 billion in 2017,¹⁰ the EU’s post-JCPOA trade with Iran amounted at its peak in the same year to €18.4 billion, a mere fraction of that level.¹¹

Interestingly, the EU managed to establish three delegations in the GCC countries — in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and most recently Kuwait — something that it has so far been unsuccessful in establishing in Iran. At the

⁹ Ramola Talwar Badam, “EU says it is open to free trade deal with GCC”, *The National*, 18 February 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/eu-says-it-is-open-to-free-trade-deal-with-gcc-1.827284>.

¹⁰ “EU–Gulf Region Trade Relations”, website of European Commission, accessed 11 January 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/gulf-region/>.

¹¹ EU–Iran Trade Relations, website of European Commission, accessed 11 January 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/iran/>.

opening of the delegation office in Kuwait, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy stated: “The EU is increasing its presence and its engagement in the Middle East and the [Persian] Gulf — because we are neighbours, we share the same region and we are tied to one another.”¹² That the EU considers the Persian Gulf and Europe to be part of the same region — Eurasia — suggests bilateral and multilateral relations could deepen.

The signing of the JCPOA and the removal of sanctions against Iran paved the way for the European Union, especially the powerful E3, to normalise ties with Iran and develop them in a way that had been inconceivable before.

While the EU has a unified policy with regard to the GCC, each EU member state has an independent approach,¹³ shaped by its energy needs, trade and investment goals, as well as its geopolitical and geostrategic considerations. Likewise, each of the GCC states has a preferred European partner. Although each has historically had close relations with Britain, greater priority is now being accorded to relations with the other European countries. Qatar, for example, has been persistently strengthening its strategic, economic and military relationship with Germany, particularly since the imposition of the Arab blockade on the sheikhdom.¹⁴ The UAE, for its part, has been keen on expanding military relations with France, particularly in the face of growing tensions between Iran and the US in the Persian Gulf.¹⁵ Notwithstanding these different emphases among the GCC countries, Iran, and its relations with countries across Eurasia, is one of the primary reasons for this reconfiguration of their respective foreign policies.

¹² “EU marks peace building partnership with new delegation in Kuwait”, European Union External Action, 14 July 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/65427/eu-marks-peace-building-partnership-new-delegation-kuwait_km.

¹³ Zaccara, interview.

¹⁴ Nayef bin Nahar, “Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region: View from Qatar”, European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/qatar.

¹⁵ “UAE and France sign military cooperation agreement”, *The National*, 24 November 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/uae-and-france-sign-military-cooperation-agreement-1.941953>.

In spite of their expanding ties with Europe, none of the GCC countries believes that the EU has a significant footprint on the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf region. As bin Nahar argues: “The reality is that Europeans have not occupied a pivotal position on the most important regional issues” and “the EU and its member states have been unable to shift the balance of power in the region”.¹⁶ Nevertheless, and as part of their strategy of diversifying their foreign relations, the GCC states have been compelled to expand relations with the European countries.

Relations with Russia

Rivalry for the expansion of relations with Russia is also significant and has a serious impact on the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf. Iran and Russia have greatly expanded their strategic, military and economic co-operation in the past decade, particularly since the Arab uprisings — a co-operation especially notable in Syria — and the implementation of the JCPOA. This trend has been a source of concern for the GCC states and has propelled them into serious competition with Iran for influence and partnerships with Russia. The GCC states had long been wary of Russia’s intentions and regional policies. While most initially opposed Russia’s interference in the Syrian conflict, all have gradually begun to realise that strengthening relations with Russia is of significant value.¹⁷ As such, Russia and the GCC states have strengthened their relations since 2013, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and later Qatar gradually expanding diplomatic, economic and military relations.

Unlike the Europeans, Russia feels that its interests are better served by engaging the GCC states individually rather than as a bloc. However, as Kozhanov argues, “the rivalry between Iran and the GCC is a headache for Russia”, which needs both — Iran for geostrategic interests and the GCC states for economic reasons, particularly to draw GCC investments and to co-operate with the GCC states within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec).¹⁸ Kozhanov also contends that Russia feels the

¹⁶ Bin Nahar, “View From Qatar”.

¹⁷ Courtney Freer, “GCC–Russia Relations: Looking beyond Syria and towards Investment”, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1 May 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/05/01/gcc-russia-relations-looking-beyond-syria-and-towards-investment/>.

¹⁸ Nikolay Kozhanov, expert on Russia’s relations with Iran and the GCC States, and associate professor at Qatar University, in interview with author, 28 January 2020.

critical need to be more engaged with the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, because 20 per cent of the Russian population are Sunni Muslims.¹⁹ Moreover, the Persian Gulf region has traditionally been considered the backyard of the US, and that reason adds to Russia's motivation for greater involvement in the region.²⁰ Russia has, therefore, actively sought to forge a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf region since 2007, proposing a number of, largely unsuccessful, initiatives, the most recent being its 2019 proposal to the United Nations for "Collective Security in the Persian Gulf".²¹

Russia has had to engage in a diligent balancing act between Iran and the GCC states without compromising its own interests or those of its Iranian and Arab counterparts. Russian President Vladimir Putin's trip to the Persian Gulf in October 2019 signalled Russia's interest in engaging the GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. His trip was preceded by lucrative trips to Russia by Saudi Arabia's King Salman (2017) and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (2018), and by Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (2017 and 2018). On the other hand, Putin has travelled to Iran three times since 2015, most recently in 2018. In addition, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has travelled to Moscow five times since 2014 on top of engagements between the two countries within multilateral forums, including the Russia–Iran–Turkey trilateral meetings on the situation in Syria, the Caspian Summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Summit and the Eurasian Economic Union Summit (where Iran signed a free trade agreement with the union in late 2019).²²

Relations with China

Forging relations with this rapidly growing Eurasian power is also of great importance to both Iran and the GCC states. China has become a strategic partner of Iran. Since the turn of the century, their partnership has expanded across a variety of fields in direct opposition to the US as both countries (as

¹⁹ Kozhanov, interview.

²⁰ Kozhanov, interview.

²¹ "Russia presents to UN its concept of collective security in Persian Gulf", TASS, 30 July 2019.

²² Omid Rahimi and Aweek Sen, "Iran trade deal with Russia-led bloc warrants cautious optimism", Bourse and Bazaar, 22 October 2019, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/10/21/iran-joins-russian-led-trade-bloc-with-cautious-optimism>.

well as Russia) encounter US hegemonic actions, including unilateral sanctions and tariffs. China's veto-wielding power in the UN Security Council, as well as its role as a signatory to the JCPOA, has given cause for Iran to prioritise expanding relations with China. In addition, China has become Iran's primary economic benefactor since the American withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of US sanctions on Iran.²³ One significant, yet undervalued, factor that gives the China–Iran relationship a strategic depth that the China–GCC relationship lacks is the shared sense of pride that China and Iran have as ancient civilisations. Nevertheless, the GCC states have become more accommodating to China's regional ambitions across Eurasia — particularly with regard to China's priorities, namely, successfully pushing through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and ensuring unimpeded oil and gas supplies from the Persian Gulf.

In its Persian Gulf policy, China has been careful not to entangle itself in regional contentions. As such, China has also expanded its relations with the GCC countries while developing ties with Iran. Similar to Russia, Beijing engages the GCC states bilaterally rather than as a bloc, and it has prioritised relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Apart from making a state visit to Iran in 2016, President Xi Jinping travelled to Saudi Arabia the same year and to the UAE in 2018. While Rouhani has travelled to China three times since 2014, the heads of state of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar visited China once each between 2017 and 2019; Mohamed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Zayed also each made a visit to China in 2019.

The GCC states' deep partnerships with the US have always been the elephant in the room when the sheikhdoms attempt to forge ties with other major powers. As Farajirad argues, "if the growing relations between the GCC states and China are seen as countering Iran", the US has typically "turned a blind eye".²⁴ However, when these relations directly affect Washington's national interests and global policies, the GCC states have been left with no choice but to change course. The US–China rivalry in the region came to the fore in the Duqm port project in Oman. While China had planned to

²³ Michael B Greenwald, "The Silk Road and the Gulf: A new Frontier for the RMB", Atlantic Council, 18 March 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-silk-road-and-the-gulf-a-new-frontier-for-the-rmb/>.

²⁴ Farajirad, interview.

invest billions of dollars in the project with a view to establishing a base in the Arabian peninsula, the US signed an agreement with Oman with the primary objective to “limit Chinese commercial and logistical expansion”.²⁵ This is only one example of US influence over the GCC states, but it is illustrative of how the GCC states may have to strike a balance in their relations with the US and other major powers.

Conclusion

Iran and the GCC states have recognised that the Eurasian framework offers vast opportunities to advance their respective national interests. However, the Eurasian powers — the E3, China and Russia — have their own approaches and visions of how to engage Iran and the GCC states. Nonetheless, these powers’ willingness to engage both Iran and the GCC states is a slight improvement over America’s one-sided approach to the Persian Gulf region. Yet, we are still not at a point where the Eurasian vision offers a perfect way out from contentions between Iran and the GCC states. Rather, this new vision has exacerbated their rivalries. The thrust towards Eurasia will continue to shape relations between Iran and the GCC states for decades to come, and one hopes that this realm will eventually see healthy competition rather than zero-sum contentions.

²⁵ Camille Lons, “Onshore Balancing: The Threat to Oman’s Neutrality”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 3 April 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_onshore_balancing_the_threat_to_omans_neutrality.

Israel and Iran

Thrust Together by Eurasia



Daniel Amir

Abstract

The rivalry between Israel and Iran is a key element of contemporary understandings of the Middle East. This article argues that, despite highlighting the explosive hostility between Israel and Iran in certain areas, analysts sometimes neglect to examine the few points where the two do interact. A frequent theatre for this overlap is Eurasia. Here, the relative absence of American dominance sees Tel Aviv and Tehran thrust together, making space for nuanced relationships with and through common partners. The article ends by discussing the risks and challenges that Eurasia presents to the two countries' political, economic and ideological concerns.

Israel and Iran are often portrayed as arch-rivals in the Middle East. Divided over Iran's nuclear programme, the Palestinian question and a US-led global order, they appear to be irreconcilable powers in an unstable region. In spite of efforts to isolate Iran from this US-led system, Israel and the Islamic Republic find themselves sharing ground in an expanding Eurasian arena. Here we see both countries operating in parallel in an environment that is less weighted by American leadership. Overlapping and increasingly robust relations with alternative superpowers such as Russia or China serve to wrap both countries into a closer matrix of relations, where they share warm ties with many countries. This is an atypical dynamic, in which external changes encourage them to begin accepting the fact that "my enemy's friend is my friend, too".

Israel and Iran's separate relations with Eurasia are well studied. But absent from a great deal of the analysis is an understanding of the balance that exists between the two countries in the Eurasian context. The prevailing paradigm, which views the two in a much narrower Middle Eastern framework, fails to

acknowledge the existence of this much more nuanced web of relations between them further afield. While the two clash over Syria or Iranian proxies in the Gaza Strip, in Eurasia, both pursue similar interests along similar lines. This trend thrusts the two into ever closer proximity without seeing them collide. Attractive forces draw Tel Aviv and Tehran nearer to each other on common ground, urging them to tolerate one another in a permissive environment fostered by the region's less ideologically motivated powers.

Peripheries

Soon after Israel's establishment in 1948, the country developed what became known as the "periphery doctrine" in an attempt to pursue ties with non-Arab regional countries, including Iran.¹ This aimed to protect against shared threats from the Arab states while also serving some of Israel's energy needs. These same concerns gave rise to Israeli assistance to Tehran during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War, culminating in the Iran–Contra affair.² Iran's nuclear programme, though, has proved to be a perpetual source of tension, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu often at the forefront of firm opposition to it. This has been exacerbated by the Trump administration, which has supported Israeli interests while seeking to apply "maximum pressure" on Tehran. Most notably, Washington has bolstered the Israeli narrative on Jerusalem and settlements in the occupied West Bank,³ while pulling out of the 2015 nuclear deal (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA).

This analysis comes at a moment of flux and difficulty for both Israel and Iran. At the time of writing, Israel's third election in 12 months has yet to yield a new government, while Netanyahu faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.⁴ In Iran, protests that followed a hike in fuel prices in

¹ Natan Sachs, "Iran's revolution, 40 years on: Israel's reverse periphery doctrine", Brookings Institution, 24 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/irans-revolution-40-years-on-israels-reverse-periphery-doctrine/>.

² Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry* (RAND Corporation, 2011), 18.

³ "Israel media jubilant over US policy change on settlements", BBC Monitoring, 19 November 2019.

⁴ Netael Bandel, "Netanyahu charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust, capping a dramatic political year", *Haaretz*, 21 November 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-charged-bribery-fraud-corruption-israel-election-1.8137771>.

the country saw hundreds of fatalities, and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacted a heavy toll on the country, with more than 70,000 people affected and nearly 5,000 deaths as of mid-April 2020.⁵ And, the renewed fears of war between Iran and the US in the wake of the latter's assassination of venerated Iranian general Qasem Soleimani at the start of the year have not receded.⁶

With Iran now very much at the centre of Israeli policy in the Middle East, it can be argued that Eurasia is becoming a new kind of “periphery”. It allows Israel some degree of strategic depth against Iran, while offering political and economic opportunities that the two countries must share.

A New Multilateralism

The emerging Eurasian political and economic sphere has proved to be an attractive prospect for both Iran and Israel. Although they pursue different objectives within it, they are brought closer together by the fact that the partners and institutions they must cultivate are often the same.

Operating from a position of relative weakness under US-imposed sanctions, Iran has consistently worked to diversify its economic and security relations away from a reliance on America or its allies. In October 2018, Tehran entered into a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) — whose members include Russia, Armenia and Kazakhstan — lowering tariffs on over 500 goods⁷ and granting the country access to a market with a total GDP of US\$4 trillion.⁸ Despite being several years in the making, the agreement came at an opportune moment for the Islamic Republic, with Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani hailing it as an “effective

⁵ “Iran MP says foreign nationals killed in recent protests”, BBC Monitoring, 26 November 2019; “Situation report 85: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)”, World Health Organization, 14 April 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200414-sitrep-85-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=7b8629bb_4

⁶ “Iranian official: General's killing strengthened regional unity”, BBC Monitoring, 13 January 2020.

⁷ “Iran to join free trade zone within Eurasian Union late October”, BBC Monitoring, 1 September 2019.

⁸ Omid Rahimi and Aveek Sen, “Iran trade deal with Russia-led bloc warrants cautious optimism”, Bourse and Bazaar, 22 October 2019, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/10/21/iran-joins-russian-led-trade-bloc-with-cautious-optimism>.

option to stop America's unilateralism in trade".⁹

The country's efforts in the EAEU are paralleled by its work to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a Chinese-led Eurasian body sometimes seen as a rival to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato). Tehran has submitted two applications to become a full member since 2008, both of which have stalled.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in a June 2019 speech at the forum, President Hassan Rouhani stressed Iran's readiness to boost ties with China and other regional powers on political, economic and security issues.¹¹ Iran, then, has been looking to integrate into this emerging bloc as a counterweight to American pressures for some time. Integration into the SCO would advance Iran's interests on both a practical and ideological level, where it frequently emphasises a sense of waning global American strength. But these groupings are interest based, and, despite Iran attempting to evade Washington and its allies, Israel is courting these same partners in Eurasia.

Unlike Iran, Israel is operating from a position of relative strength in its relations with Eurasia, where its technological and military expertise in particular is sought after by local partners. Its efforts to expand into the region are nonetheless evolving along similar lines. In February 2019, Russian and Israeli press reported on ongoing talks between Israel and the EAEU for Israel's own free trade zone with the body.¹² Elsewhere, Israel has reportedly sought a lower-level "dialogue partner" status within the SCO,¹³ given that membership of the body could potentially encroach on Israel's strong bonds with the US.

Despite the obvious benefits an agreement with the EAEU would bring, Israeli authorities at the time were unclear about the implications of Israel

⁹ "Iran peaker calls for free trade among Eurasian countries", BBC Monitoring, 9 October 2019.

¹⁰ Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, *Triple-Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 44.


¹¹ "Iran president hails 'strategic ties' with China", BBC Monitoring, 14 June 2019.

¹² Raphael Ahren, "Israel and Iran both set to join Russia-led free trade zone", *The Times of Israel*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-and-iran-both-set-to-join-russia-led-free-trade-zone/>.

¹³ "'SCO family' widening? Many candidates share 'Shanghai spirit', but expansion not a goal", TASS, 5 September 2019, <https://tass.com/world/1076750>.

joining a body that would also be alleviating the economic pressure that it had supported on Iran. Relations with the powers in Eurasia appeared to be Israel's first concern here. For Israel, the gains it derives from a deal with the EAEU could possibly be justified by the likelihood that any benefit Iran derives from its own partnership with the EAEU is likely to be far outweighed by the impact of the US sanctions on the Iranian economy.

Some of these partnerships are simply too profitable for Iran to represent a major sticking point. Israel's wider interactions and aspirations within Eurasia are perhaps most apparent in its ever-expanding relationship with China, now its largest trade partner after the US. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992, bilateral trade has risen from US\$51.5 million to US\$15.3 billion in 2018.¹⁴ Also, Chinese investment in the Israeli technology sector exceeded US\$325 million in 2018.¹⁵ Israel has signalled a continued openness towards investment from China in other sectors too, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and prospects of Chinese investment in Israeli infrastructure remain both lucrative and controversial.



Unlike Iran, Israel is operating from a position of relative strength in its relations with Eurasia, where its technological and military expertise in particular is sought after by local partners.

Smaller powers are equally unfazed by their positioning between Israel and Iran. In 2018, Kazakhstan exported roughly US\$400 million in goods to each country.¹⁶ For these nations, there seems to be little inherent contradiction in cementing closer ties with the two rival powers even at a time of friction between them. As Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

¹⁴ Mordechai Chaziza, "Israel agrees to monitor foreign investment", *BESA Center Perspectives*, 1, no. 340, (November 2019), <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-monitor-foreign-investment/>.

¹⁵ Chaziza, "Israel agrees to monitor foreign investment".

¹⁶ UN Comtrade, UN Statistical Division, 2018.

told Iranian diplomats: “The sun and the moon exist, and so indeed does Israel.”¹⁷

The warm relations that both Tel Aviv and Tehran enjoy with the key players in Eurasia bring the two within touching distance of each other — something that Israel’s alliance with the US does not offer it. In 2018, Israel’s minister for regional co-operation, Likud veteran Tzachi Hanegbi, told the *South China Morning Post* that China could “talk sensitively” with Iran about the nuclear deal.¹⁸ For Israel, China and Russia are valuable middlemen in this Eurasian calculus, supported by a constellation of friendly ties with smaller states. This allows Israel to dedicate efforts to supporting Trump’s tough policies towards Iran on the one hand, but still have recourse to a more considered realpolitik in Eurasia.

Red Lines

Some have seen these attitudes as exemplifying a “naive” and “purely transactional approach” towards international relations.¹⁹ But elements of this very distinctly Eurasian outlook have also served to foster deconffliction and avoid crisis at military flashpoints, despite friction between Israel and Iran.

The most apparent case of this has been in Syria, where Russian intervention has provided a bulwark between conflicting Israeli and Iranian interests. Buoyed by an “apparent withdrawal of the US from the region”,²⁰ culminating in the pull-out of American troops from northern Syria in October 2019, Russia has set itself up as the conflict’s dominant superpower. Alongside Iran, it has helped to stabilise the war in favour of Syria’s embattled president, Bashar Assad. Tehran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have in the meantime supplied military forces on the ground and

¹⁷ Eldad Beck, “I told the Iranians: The moon and the stars exist and so does Israel”, *Israel Hayom*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/665207>. [Translation by author]

¹⁸ Teddy Ng, “China can use ‘good relationship’ to push Iran on nuclear programme, Israeli official says”, *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2153763/china-can-use-good-relationship-push-iran-nuclear>.

¹⁹ Brett McGurk, “China’s Risky Middle East Bet”, *The Atlantic*, 29 April 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/chinas-risky-middle-east-bet/588166/>.

²⁰ Sinan Hatahet, “Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria”, Chatham House, 8 March 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-and-iran-economic-influence-syria>.

some US\$6.6 billion in credit lines.²¹ Part of the Russian role has involved “posing as a mediator, facilitator and guarantor” for a number of US allies, including Israel and its concerns in the conflict.²²

With Israel, Russia has sought to accommodate the country’s concerns even when this has caused friction with Tehran. Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin met 13 times between Moscow’s initial intervention in Syria in 2015 and the September 2019 elections in Israel. Analysts have suggested that this has been part of a mechanism permitting Israel to undertake hundreds of strikes against Hezbollah and IRGC positions, while leaving Assad undisturbed in Syria.²³ Under this agreement, and fearing damage to its relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia, Russia has also demurred on sales of key military equipment to Iran,²⁴ including its famed S-400 air defence system. This demarcation of Russia’s relations with Iran and Israel, in part a product of a Eurasian realignment, may have helped to de-escalate a potentially much broader front opening to Israel’s north and a deterioration of an already bloody conflict.

In Syria, Russian intervention has provided a bulwark between conflicting Israeli and Iranian interests.

Somehow then, both countries have been able partially to secure their interests in Syria through Russian brokerage. Echoing Hanegbi’s comment above, Israel clearly understands the Russian posture and is able to turn to it when the limits of its ties to the US become apparent. The same interest-based forces acting on Israel and Iran in Eurasia, then, provide key channels for mitigating conflict. This is a much more fragile deconfliction than the overlapping economic and political interests discussed in the previous section.

²¹ Sinan Hatahet, “Russia and Iran”.

²² Hatahet, “Russia and Iran”.

²³ Lidia Averbukh and Margarete Klein, “Russia–Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict”, *SWP Comment* 37 (2018), German Institute for International Security Affairs, 5.

²⁴ Martin Russell, “Russia in the Middle East: From Sidelines To Centre Stage”, European Parliament Research Service, November 2019.

But relations with smaller states, too, show that Israel and Iran are willing to occasionally share relations even when security concerns present obstacles.

The Iranian military and security establishment has paid close attention to Israel's courting of Eurasia. Over the last two years, the hardline news agency Tasnim, which has ties to the IRGC, published a seven-part analysis detailing its outlook on Israel's bilateral relations with Eurasia, mostly focusing on Central Asia and the Caucasus. In its view, Israel's ties with Eurasian countries aim to "create a chasm in the Muslim front", seek recognition from a larger number of Muslim countries and contain Iranian influence.²⁵ But Tasnim's analysis did not go as far as condemning these Eurasian countries, even those with deeper security ties to Israel.

The agency's analysis only briefly mentions Azerbaijan, as the "most [strategically] important" country in the region for Israel and one to which it "sells weapons".²⁶ Indeed, as Iran continues to negotiate over its stake in the resource-rich Caspian Sea, the latter's waters will be patrolled by Israeli-designed Saar-62 ships sold to Azerbaijan.²⁷ President Rouhani has nonetheless said that Iran would work with Baku for the "establishment of more peace and security in the region and the world".²⁸ Clearly, this shared sphere of operations carries with it a sense of threat, but does so without crossing any of Iran's red lines in an area of increasing value to it.

Shanghai Spirit

Iran and Israel are drawn in similar directions in Eurasia, but their integration into the area carries comparable risks for both, and there are limits to what these less aligned relations are able to provide.

²⁵ "Israel's Relations with the Countries of Eurasia — 7: the Soft Development Of Israel And Uzbekistan's Convergent Relations", Tasnim News Agency, 1 June 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/03/11/2023265>. [Translation by author]

²⁶ "Israel's Relations with the Countries of Eurasia — 5: the Soft Development Of Israel's Relations with Armenia and Georgia", Tasnim News Agency, 15 May 2018, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/02/25/1724007>. [Translation by author]

²⁷ Yvonne-Stefania Efstathiou, "The Caspian Sea: Formerly Troubled Waters?", IISS Military Balance Blog, 10 September 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/09/caspian-sea-troubled-waters>.

²⁸ "Rouhani says Tehran-Baku cooperation in region's interest", BBC Monitoring, 24 October 2019.

Consistent Chinese support for Palestinian self-determination in international forums represents one of the central tensions in Israel's relations with China.²⁹ Neither China nor Russia participated in the US-sponsored international conference on the Palestinian economy in June 2019 in Bahrain in what some outlets described as a “boycott” or “snub” of Trump's so-called “Deal of the Century”.³⁰ Support for its narrative on Palestine on the world stage is of immense importance to Israel, which has striven to face down the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. In some arenas then, prosperity through Eurasia is no match for the existential support Israel gains in Washington.

America's firm backing for Israel also puts the latter in a difficult position when it comes to China. Beijing's interest in key Israeli infrastructure projects, including the possible management of the strategic Haifa Port by a Chinese company, has raised concerns in Washington. On the very day that the US announced its effective recognition of the Golan Heights, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that elements of security and intelligence co-operation with Israel could be downgraded if certain Chinese “systems go in certain places”.³¹

Pompeo's warnings of China “spying through its commercial state-owned enterprises”³² were echoed by analysts in Israel.³³ Under US pressure, Israel has launched a monitoring body to supervise foreign investment in the country, although its unwritten purpose appears to focus on China.³⁴ A final decision on the Haifa Port and other major infrastructural projects has yet

²⁹ Shira Efron and Lyle J Morris, *The Evolving Israel-China Relationship* (RAND Corporation, 2019), 5.

³⁰ Zhenhua Lu, “China sides with Palestinians by snubbing showcase for Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan”, *South China Morning Post*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3012507/china-sides-palestinians-snubbing-showcase-donald-trumps>.

³¹ “Pompeo warns US could curb security ties with Israel over China relations”, *The Times of Israel*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pompeo-warns-us-could-curb-security-ties-with-israel-over-china-relations/>.

³² *The Times of Israel*, “Pompeo warns US”.

³³ Yossi Melman, “Israel continues to allow Chinese companies to infiltrate strategic infrastructure in the country”, *Maariv*, 6 July 2019, <https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/Article-706878>.

³⁴ Noa Landau, “Israel panel to monitor Chinese investments following US pressure”, *Haaretz*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-to-form-committee-to-monitor-chinese-investments-following-u-s-pressure-1.8058754>.

to be made. And since Israel's relationship with the US is paramount, Tel Aviv will be forced to formulate a more nuanced long-term outlook for its ties with Beijing.

Since Israel's relationship with the US is paramount, Tel Aviv will be forced to formulate a more nuanced long-term outlook on its ties to Beijing.

When it comes to Iran, China and Russia's support has also been far from unconditional. Trade with China has not been enough to help Iran recoup the losses incurred as a result of sanctions. While not quite hitting zero, Chinese imports of Iranian oil have sloped off since the imposition of US sanctions and in light of the availability of suppliers elsewhere.³⁵ Iran's response to sanctions, a rollback of its commitments under the 2015 deal, has been aimed chiefly at European signatories to the accords, who it says have not stepped up either. Even here, as Iran injected uranium into centrifuges at its underground nuclear facility at Fordow, Russia called its rollback from the nuclear agreement "deeply disturbing".³⁶ While Moscow stressed Iran's right to protest the US pull-out from the deal, both Russia and China have demonstrated their ability to curb their consonance with Iran around key issues.

This is not lost on Iranian analysts and officials. Despite its emphasis on Eurasia as a positive opportunity, Iran is wary of integration into the region at the expense of its independence. In Syria, where a Russian presence has been shown to be key to Tehran's interests, there is a sense of competition with the regional superpowers. Hassan Danaeifar, an economic adviser to Iran's first vice president, described China and Russia as "rivals" to Iran in

³⁵ Sharon Cho and Saket Sundria, "U.S. keeps eye on Iran oil buyers as sanctions squeeze flows", Bloomberg, 30 October 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-30/u-s-keeping-eye-on-iran-oil-buyers-as-sanctions-squeeze-flows>.

³⁶ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran distances itself further from nuclear deal, alarming Russia, France", Reuters, 6 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-fordow/iran-distances-itself-further-from-nuclear-deal-alarming-russia-france-idUSKBN1XG13D>.

the reconstruction of Syria and urged “vigilance” with respect to them.³⁷ Like Israel, Iran is aware of the limits that its closeness to Russia and China may have. A sanctioned Iran, however, under greater financial stress and lacking an outspoken ally like the US behind it, will have very different considerations to take into account and less flexibility in how it structures its relations with Eurasia’s key figures.

Eurasia, then, brings mixed blessings for Israel and Iran, where they are thrust into somewhat closer contact in pursuit of their own security and prosperity. This is in stark contrast to their sometimes explosive relations elsewhere, despite deconfliction measures in theatres like Syria. Still, Eurasia sees the two countries pursuing warm relations with common friends in a web of dynamics that is broader than the framework of the Middle East alone. Both are aware of the disadvantages and risks of these developing ties, but they bring valuable points of contact through third parties that seek détente. This has not been a panacea for tensions or conflict, but does warrant a change in the paradigm of how analysts see the next chapter in the road between Tel Aviv and Tehran.

³⁷ “Adviser says China, Russia Iran’s main rivals in Syrian market”, BBC Monitoring, 6 October 2019.

Russia and Iran in Greater Eurasia



Nicole Grajewski

Abstract

Russia is seeking to establish its centrality as an order-builder in the macro-regional system of Eurasia, lending a Eurasian dimension to Russia–Iran relations. The Russia–Iran relationship in Eurasia illustrates the complex interplay between geo-economic ambitions, security imperatives and wider normative projects.

Introduction

At the St Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin articulated Moscow’s intention to initiate a “Great Eurasian partnership” — a framework for macro-regional political, security and economic integration encompassing the states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well as China, India, Pakistan and Iran.¹ The Great Eurasian partnership, more commonly known as “Greater Eurasia”, represents Moscow’s attempt to position itself as a central order-builder in the macro-regional system of Eurasia. Although vague and ill-defined, the notion of Greater Eurasia in the Russian foreign policy discourse generally denotes the concurrent geopolitical, geo-economic and normative processes that “would unite Russia, China and the post-Soviet Central Asian states — together potentially with Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan and India — into a powerful new geopolitical space that could pose a fundamental challenge to the US-led liberal international order”.² Rather than representing a novel approach to foreign policy, Greater Eurasia draws upon extant ideas and orientations that

¹ Vladimir Putin, “Plenary Session of St Petersburg International Economic Forum”, President of Russia, 17 June 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178>.

² David G Lewis, “Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of ‘Greater Eurasia’”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (2018): 1613.

have historically shaped Russia's foreign policy towards the region.

Within the context of Moscow's Eurasia foreign policy, Iran occupies a privileged position as a bulwark against Western encroachment and a like-minded security partner against the imposition of liberal norms and external standards of legitimacy.

Within the context of Moscow's Eurasia foreign policy, Iran occupies a privileged position as a bulwark against Western encroachment and a like-minded security partner against the imposition of liberal norms and external standards of legitimacy.³ During periods of increasing discontent with American policy within Russia, Iran has factored in mainstream Russian foreign policy discussions on the creation of a geopolitical union with the major power centres on the Eurasian landmass, including the idea of a "Eurasian quadrangle" consisting of China, Russia, India and Iran — a union that broadens Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov's 1998 proposal for a Moscow–Beijing–Delhi "strategic triangle".⁴ From Moscow's perspective, Iran is not just a country in the "Middle East"; rather, Iran occupies a geographically, politically and economically important position as a country located on the southern borders of Russia's "near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*), a region that Moscow has historically viewed as its zone of preferential interest. The Eurasian dimension of Russia–Iran relations illustrates the continuities in Russia's foreign policy towards Iran, which has been focused on maintaining relations with its influential southern neighbour and engaging in a dialogue on regional issues ranging from the Caspian Sea to Afghanistan.

³ In Russia, the importance of "Eurasia" and "Eurasian civilisation" in the formation of the country's unique identity is associated with Eurasianism (*Evrasiizstvo*), a school of thought consisting of figures like Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Pyotr Savitsky, Vadim Tsymbursky, Lev Gumilyov and Aleksandr Dugin. Although often on the fringes of the Russian political discourse, the ideas articulated by the Eurasianists have, at times, been integrated and re-adapted into official policy. In the post-Soviet period, Eurasianists have been the strongest advocates of a closer alignment with Iran for various reasons typically relating to geopolitics and culture.

⁴ For example, during the 1997 US–Russia summit in Helsinki, President Boris Yeltsin warned President Bill Clinton that in the event of Nato expansion in Europe, Russia would be forced to pay more attention to its policy in the east, and in particular to its relations with China, India and Iran. Mikhail Karpov and Dmitrii Gornostayev, "Rossiya i SShA Soglasilis', Chto Ne Soglasny Drug s Drugom Na Rasshirenie Severoatlanticheskogo Soyuzha Moskva Otvetit Svoim Prodvizheniem Na Vostok" [Moscow and the USA agreed to disagree on the enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance, Moscow will respond with its advance to the east], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 March 1997.

Notwithstanding the changing regional order and the emergence of new actors seeking to assume greater influence in the political and economic processes in Eurasia, the factors inherent in Moscow's approach to the region will invariably continue to shape Russian foreign policy towards Iran.

For Iran, Russia has been central to its ongoing efforts to overcome international isolation and the constraints of American preeminence through participation in non-Western regional projects in Eurasia.⁵ Iran takes a cautiously pragmatic approach to Eurasia, one which is “heavily conditioned by the strategic impact of Iran's relations with Russia”, that is, the ability to obtain some degree of international legitimacy through bilateral and multilateral engagement with Moscow on economic and security issues.⁶ Tehran's implicit recognition of Moscow's sphere of privileged interests in Russia's “near abroad” reflects Iran's Russia-centric regional policy in post-Soviet Eurasia, whereby, “Iran acknowledges Russia's leadership ... as a guarantor of the balance of interests” against US hegemonic ambitions.⁷ As a frame for understanding the continuities and changes in Russia–Iran relations, the notion of Eurasia demonstrates the complex interplay between geo-economic ambitions, security imperatives and wider normative projects that have shaped and sustained Moscow's relations with Tehran at the regional level.

Geo-economic Connectivity

The Russian discourse on Greater Eurasia stresses Iran's potential to assume a pivotal role as a regional centre of power and a geographic bridge connecting Eurasia to the Middle East and South Asia that could broaden the opportunities for transcontinental trade. One of the leading architects of Greater Eurasia, Sergey Karaganov, argues: “Iran is almost destined to become a dynamic centre of the new supercontinent, unless it falls victim to new

⁵ Edmund Herzig, “Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia”, *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 504–17; Morteza Damanpak Jami and Jalal Dihghani Firoozabadi, “Dīplumāsī-i Iqtisādī-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Irān Dar Āsiyā-Yi Markazī” [Economic Diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Central Asia], *Faslnāmah-i Mutāla'ā-i Āsiyā-Yi Markazī va Qafqāz* 22, no. 96 (February 1, 2017): 25–66, http://ca.ipisjournals.ir/article_24384.html.

⁶ Mohiaddin Mesbahi, “Eurasia between Russia, Turkey, and Iran”, in *Key Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia: The Return of the 'Great Game*, ed Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E Kanet (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 176.

⁷ Mehdi Sanaei, *Otmosheniya Irana s Tsentral'noaziatskimi Stranami SNG : Sotsial'no-Politicheskie i Ekonomicheskie Aspekty* [Iran's Relations with Central Asian CIS Countries: Sociopolitical and Economic Aspects] (Moscow: Muravei, 2002), 128.

aggression. ... Iran can connect the Persian Gulf and India with the north of the continent.”⁸ Although heavily conditioned by geographic determinism, the Russian narrative corresponds to Iran’s view of its historical role and its potential to re-emerge as a formidable power in the region. Iran tends to portray its involvement in regional initiatives as a testament to its centrality in promoting regional connectivity and shaping the emerging “multipolar” world order.⁹

Russia and Iran’s discursive embellishment on the extent of regional connectivity and economic co-operation belies the paucity of intra-regional trade and the absence of tangible development in fostering regionalism.

Russia and Iran’s discursive embellishment on the extent of regional connectivity and economic co-operation belies the paucity of intra-regional trade and the absence of tangible development in fostering regionalism. Macro-regional initiatives remain unfulfilled. There have been numerous delays in building transcontinental corridors such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and international sanctions have led to setbacks in infrastructural projects. The Russia–Iran bilateral economic relationship is marred by historical distrust, domestic economic weaknesses and the absence of complementary trade structures. Thus, beyond co-operating on civilian nuclear energy and arms sales, the two countries continue to face challenges in cultivating a broader and durable economic relationship despite the ostensible interest in doing so.

For Moscow and Tehran, the Caspian Sea comprises a mosaic of overlapping and conflicting interests, which have been deeply affected by regional economic ambitions, domestic political imperatives and centuries-long historical grievances over territorial disputes. The collapse of the Soviet Union effectively terminated the Soviet–Iranian condominium in the Caspian

⁸ Sergey Karaganov, “The New Cold War and the Emerging Greater Eurasia”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1 July 2018): 89, doi:10.1016/j.euras.2018.07.002.

⁹ Ali Akbar Velayati, “Bih Sū-yi Nizām-i Chand Quṭbī” [Towards a Multipolar System], *Hamshahrī*, 18 September 2006.

Sea, prompting a two-decade struggle among the five littoral states — Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan — over the legal status of the Caspian.¹⁰ Throughout the 2000s, Iran’s insistence on the “equal” division of the sea impeded negotiations and served as a source of tension between Russia and Iran. Yet, compared to Baku, Ashgabat and Nur-Sultan, Moscow and Tehran have displayed closer proximity on issues concerning the prohibition of non-Caspian military forces from the region and have been thwarting the construction of international pipelines such as the Trans-Caspian Pipeline.¹¹ The August 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea settled outstanding questions on navigation rights, environmental protection, presence of non-Caspian forces and the construction of pipelines. The delimitation of the seabed and subsoil, however, was postponed for future deliberation. Within Iran, Tehran’s perceived acquiescence to the demands of Russia and the other littoral powers over the future division of the Caspian was viewed through the prism of the country’s fragile international situation, reviving memories of the Qajar territorial concessions to imperial Russia and prompting a domestic backlash.¹² Notwithstanding this public sentiment in Iran, the official discourse in Moscow and Tehran accentuated the economic benefits that could arise from developing land and sea transit connecting the Caspian littoral powers to each other and to the wider global market.

The Caspian Sea occupies an integral role in Moscow and Tehran’s ambitions to develop the INSTC, which aims to connect Eurasia to the Persian Gulf and South Asia through a multi-modal network of railways,

¹⁰ For a historical and contemporary overview of the division of the Caspian Sea, see Lyudmila Kulagina, *Granitsa Rossii s Iranom: Istoriya formirovaniya* [Russia’s Border with Iran: the History of Formation] (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 1998); Elena Dunaeva and Lyudmila Kulagina, *Rossiya i Iran: Istoriya Formirovaniya Granits* [Russia and Iran: The History of the Formation of Borders], 2nd edition (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2007); Elena Dunaeva, “IRI i Kaspiiskaya Problema” [Iran and the Caspian Problem], in *Rol’ i mesto Irana v regione*, ed Nina Mamedova and Mahdi Imanipur (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2007), 89–98; Stanislav Pritchkin, “Sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Irana V Regione Kaspiiskogo Moria : Novye Tendentsii I Perspektivy” [Russia and Iran in the Caspian Region: Trends and Prospects], in *Rossiisko-Iranskiye Otnosheniya Problemy i Perspektivy*, ed Vladimir Sazhin and Elena Dunaeva (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2015), 75–82.

¹¹ At the First Caspian Economic Forum in Turkmenistan, both Russia and Iran expressed their longstanding opposition to the construction of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline by invoking ecological concerns. Bruce Pannier, “Russia, Iran cite ‘ecological concerns’ in opposing Trans-Caspian pipeline”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 August 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-iran-trans-caspian-pipeline-turkmenistan/30111805.html>.

¹² Hamidreza Azizi, “Caspian Sea Convention moves Iran closer to northern neighbors”, *AL-Monitor*, 22 August 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/caspian-sea-convention-iran-russia-us-sanctions-pipeline.html>.

roads and shipping routes.¹³ Although Russia, India and Iran formalised an agreement on the INSTC in 2002, the development corridor faced substantial setbacks in its first decade owing to domestic economic weaknesses, lack of political will and international constraints. The subsequent expansion of the INSTC to countries beyond Russia, Iran and India, combined with the growth of investment and diplomatic ties between its participants, has allowed the INSTC to progress at a modest rate. In conjunction with the INSTC, Russia's Caspian Development Strategy relies on Iran's port infrastructure and inland road and rail networks to expand Russian exports into the Persian Gulf and South Asian markets.¹⁴ In terms of overland routes, the inauguration of the Qazvin–Rasht section of the Qazvin–Rasht–Astara railway in March

For Moscow and Tehran, the Caspian Sea comprises a mosaic of overlapping and conflicting interests, which have been deeply affected by regional economic ambitions, domestic political imperatives and centuries-long historical grievances over territorial disputes.

2019 was a noteworthy development in connecting Iran to Russia through Azerbaijan. Over the next two to three years, the railroad line will be expanded to connect Rasht to the Caspian port city of Anzali and to Astara on the Iran–Azerbaijan border with a US\$500 million loan from Baku.¹⁵ The INSTC boasts the potential to enhance Iran's centrality in the emerging geopolitical and geo-economic processes shaping Eurasia. However, the imperative to

¹³ Alexandr Polyshchuk, "Rossiisko-iranskoe sotrudnichestvo po realizatsii Mezhdunarodnogo transportnogo koridora 'Sever—Yug'" [Russian-Iranian co-operation on the implementation of the International North-South Transport Corridor], in *Rol' i mesto Irana v regione*, ed Nina Mamedova and Mahdi Imanipur (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2007), 161–67; Nina Mamedova, "Mezhdunarodnyi Transportnyi Koridor 'Sever-Yug' Kak Sovremennyy Analog Velikogo Volzhskogo Puti" [International North-South Transport Corridor as a Modern Analogue of the Great Volga Route], *Vostochnaya Analitika*, no. 3 (2018): 149–56.

¹⁴ "Strategiya Razvitiya Rossiiskikh Morskikh Portov v Kaspiiskom Basseine, Zheleznodorozhnykh i Avtomobil'nykh Podkhodov k Nim v Period Do 2030 Goda" [Strategy for the Development of Sea Ports in the Caspian Sea and Rail and Road Links to Them until 2030], Official Website of Russian Government, Paper No. 1365 (2017), <http://static.government.ru/media/files/zACqKSgh6AdU2bWZahEb92qpLifBzJr.pdf>.

¹⁵ "Mezhdunarodnyi transportnyi koridor 'Sever – Yug'" [International North-South Transport Corridor], Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 1 November 2016, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/economic_diplomacy/ism_communication/-/asset_publisher/fajfwCb4PqDA/content/id/2510952.

modernise and expand infrastructure has been stalled by a lack of financing and international sanctions on both Iran and Russia.

Although lacking China's economic largesse, Russia has contributed to the Iranian economy through investment in infrastructure and transportation projects. In late 2019, amid the economic downturn in Iran, Energy Minister Alexander Novak re-articulated Russia's proposed US\$5 billion export loan to Tehran for infrastructure projects, including railway and power plants.¹⁶ Novak's announcement appeared to constitute a mere symbolic gesture as it is unclear whether Russian Railways will resume its flagship project for the electrification of Iran's Garmsar–Inche Burun railway, a project it had abandoned in late February 2019 in the face of US sanctions on Iran.¹⁷

The EAEU's free trade agreement (FTA) with Iran has been portrayed as an opportunity that could help mitigate Iran's isolation in the light of US sanctions.¹⁸ In reality, the FTA with Iran is "a very limited preferential trade agreement in terms of scope and liberalization commitments" compared to a similar agreement concluded with Vietnam.¹⁹ Even so, since coming into force in October 2019, the FTA has led to an increase in Iran's non-oil trade with Russia, Kazakhstan and Armenia — the three countries that dominate Iran's trade with the EAEU.²⁰ Moreover, Armenia's Meghri Free Economic Zone on the border with Iran has the potential to serve as a re-export zone for Iranian goods into the EAEU. For Russia, the intensification of Iran's relations with the EAEU ties in with its own plans to use Iran as a potential hub through which its agricultural products would reach global markets, as

¹⁶ "Iran napravit rossiiskii kredit v razmere \$5 mlrd na shest' energeticheskikh i transportnykh proektov" [Iran will direct a \$5 billion Russian loan to six energy and transport projects], Vesti News, 12 December 2019, <https://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/129432>.

¹⁷ "RZhD vyidut iz proekta na €1,2 mlrd v Irane iz-za sanktsii SShA" [Russian Railways to leave a €1.2 billion project in Iran due to US sanctions], RBC Business Information Space, 25 February 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/25/02/2020/5e55495e9a794730172b5ad9>.

¹⁸ Nina Mamedova, Aleksandr Danil'tsev and Marina Glazatova, "Iran: perspektiva torgovogo sotrudnichestva so stranami EAES" [Iran: the prospect of trade co-operation with the EAEU countries], *Torgovaya Politika*, no. 3 (7) (2016): 9–32.

¹⁹ Rilka Dragneva, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Putin's Geopolitical Project", Russia Political Economy Project, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2018), 16, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/rpe-6-dragneva-final.pdf>.

²⁰ Mahnaz Abdi, "FTA with EAEU: A Turning Point for Iran's Trade", *Tehran Times*, 3 February 2020, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/444803/FTA-with-EAEU-a-turning-point-for-Iran-s-trade>.

demonstrated by the February 2019 memorandum of understanding between Iran, Russia and Kazakhstan.²¹ Notwithstanding its limited scope, the EAEU's FTA with Iran is symbolically significant as a demonstration of its solidarity with Iran against US sanctions on Tehran, especially as Russia seeks to elevate the EAEU as an alternative to Western-led integration.²²

Across Eurasia, converging security interests and concerns about instability in Central Asia, the Caspian, the Caucasus and Afghanistan have provided a fairly durable basis for Russia–Iran co-operation.

Regional Security Co-operation

Across Eurasia, converging security interests and concerns about instability in Central Asia, the Caspian, the Caucasus and Afghanistan have provided a fairly durable basis for Russia–Iran co-operation. Broadly, Iran and Russia share the dual security objectives of maintaining regional stability and limiting the presence of extra-regional or, specifically, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) forces in and around the region. Russia also envisages Iran as a stabilising force against common challenges and threats such as narco-trafficking, terrorism and transnational crime. This perception chimes with Tehran's discourse that accentuates its stabilising role in the region and its important experiences in combatting common regional challenges emanating from Afghanistan, including terrorism and narco-trafficking.²³

²¹ “Rossiya, Kazakhstan i Iran podpisali memorandum po voprosu sotrudnichestva v torgovle pshenitsej” [Russia, Kazakhstan and Iran sign memorandum on co-operation in wheat trade], Ministry of Agriculture, Russia, 12 February 2019, <http://mcx.ru/press-service/news/rossiya-kazakhstan-i-iran-podpisali-memorandum-po-voprosu-sotrudnichestva-v-torgovle-pshenitsej/>.

²² Nadezhda Tolstoukhova, “Vostochnyi bazar” [Eastern Bazar], *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 25 April 2019.

²³ See, for example, Nabiollah Ebrahimi, “Īrān Darvāzah-i Šabāt-i Āsiyā-yi Markazī” [Iran, Central Asia's Gate of Stability], *Shargh*, 4 July 2006; Mahmoud Vaezi, “Taḥavvulāt-i Sāzmān-i Hamkāri-i Shānghāy va ‘uzviyat-i Īrān” [Development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Membership of Iran], *Muṭāla‘āt-i Āsiyā-yi Markazī va Qafṣāz*, no. 53 (2006): 7–31; Jahangir Karami, “Īrān va Rūsiyah Muttahid-ī Sharqī Yā Tahdid-ī Janūbī” [Iran and Russia: Eastern Ally or Southern Threat?], *Faṣlnāmah-i Ravābi‘-i Khārijī* 7, no. 2 (2010): 171–99; Hassan Rouhani, “Matn-i Kāmil-i Subhānrān-ī Ra‘īs-i Jumhūr-i Islāmī-i Īrān Dar Nishast-i Sarān-i Sāzmān-i Hamkāri-i Shānghāy” [Full Text of the Speech of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit], *Ri‘āsat-i Jumhūrī-i Islāmī-i Īrān*, 13 September 2013, <http://president.ir/fa/71098/printable>.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran initially featured in Russian foreign policy thinking as a potential source of instability in Eurasia owing to early concerns over Iranian proselytisation in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. By the mid-1990s, the experience of Russia–Iran co-operation during the civil war in Tajikistan, combined with Tehran’s constructive position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and recognition of Chechnya as Russia’s internal affair, precipitated a shift in Russia’s understanding of Iranian foreign policy in Eurasia. In particular, Tehran’s implicit recognition of Moscow’s privileged interests in Central Asia and the South Caucasus shaped the view that Iran serves as a stabilising actor and bulwark against Western encroachment.²⁴ The onset of Nato’s campaign in Afghanistan significantly transformed the regional security environment, prompting Russia and Iran to eventually coalesce around a common posture focused on preventing the spread of instability and the influence of extra-regional forces.²⁵ During the initial stages of the war on terror, Russia demonstrated its support for the global campaign by acquiescing to the use of Central Asian bases by coalition forces while Iran played a critical role in the Bonn agreement on Afghanistan of December 2001 by garnering support for the post-Taliban government.²⁶ Although Russia and Iran welcomed the removal of the Taliban, their growing discontent over Washington’s unrestrained unilateralism and perceived efforts at democracy promotion engendered a common narrative between them that stressed intra-regional co-operation and the exclusion of non-regional actors.

Tehran’s effort to position itself as a co-operative security partner in Eurasia has remained a persistent theme in its relations with Russia and the wider region, which far predates the inception of the Great Eurasian

²⁴ Aleksandr Umnov, “Strategicheskie Interesy RF Na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke” [Strategic Interests of the Russian Federation in the Near and Middle East], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 December 1996; Aleksei Gromyko, “Rossiya i Iran: Novaya Real’nost’” [Russia and Iran: New Reality], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 26 June 1998, 8.

²⁵ Mahmood Muhammadi, *Asar-i Ma’ mūrīyat’ hā-yi Jadīd-i Nāwī Bar Manāfi’ va Amnīyat-i Millī-i Jumbūhūrī-i Islāmī-i Irān : Ab’ād-i Huqūqī - Siyāsī* [The Impact of Nato’s New Missions on the Interests and National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran] (Tehran: Markaz-i Tahqīqāt-i Istitūtiyeh, 2010); Dina Malysheva, “Perspektivy Tsentral’noi Azii: K zaversheniyu mezhdunarodnoi operatsii v Afganistane” [Prospects for Central Asia: Towards the Conclusion of the International Operation in Afghanistan], *Svobodnaya Mysl’*, no. 5 (2014): 101–12.

²⁶ Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 71–94; John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran since the Fall of the Shah*, 1st edition (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 183–206.

partnership.²⁷ Since obtaining observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2005, Iran has viewed the organisation as a vehicle to promote the expansion of its bilateral relations with Russia, China and the Central Asian states as well as an important forum for intra-regional co-operation on security issues.²⁸ In addition to collaborating with the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, Tehran has been involved in the SCO–Afghanistan contact group and has participated as an observer in the “Kanal” joint anti-narcotics operations under the auspices of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since 2004.²⁹ In the Caspian Sea, Iran supported Russia's various proposals for a common regional security alliance among littoral states to deal with the movement of terrorists and narcotics from Afghanistan, including the proposal for a rapid reaction force.³⁰ Overlapping concerns over the need to stabilise Afghanistan and shared

Tehran's effort to position itself as a co-operative security partner in Eurasia has remained a persistent theme in its relations with Russia and the wider region, which far predates the inception of the Great Eurasian partnership.

²⁷ Mahmoud Vaezi, *Zhi'ūpuliūk-i buhrān dar Āsiyā-yi Markazī va Qafqāz* [Geopolitics of crisis in Central Asia and the Caucasus] (Tehran: Daftar-i Muṭāla'āt-i Siyāsī va Bayn al-Milālī, 2007).

²⁸ Mehdi Sanaei, “Evraziya i mesto Irana v regional'nom sotrudnichestve” [Eurasia and the Place of Iran in Regional Co-operation], in *Politika RF I IRI v Regional'nom Kontekste: TsA, Kavkaz, Blizhnii Vostok*, ed Elena Dunaeva and Nina Mamedova (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2011), 28–34; Nina Mamedova, “Iran i ShOS” [Iran and the SCO], in *ShOS i Svrany Blizhnego i Srednego Vostoka*, ed Marianna Arunova and Bakhtier Khakimov (Moscow: Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN, 2011), 31–46; Elena Dunaeva, “Regionalizm vo Vneshnei Politike Islamskoi Respubliki Iran (k Voprosu o Vstuplenii IRI v ShOS)” [Regionalism in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (on the Issue of Iran's Membership in the SCO)], in *Aktual'nye Problemy Rasshireniya Shankhaiskoi Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva: Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi Konferentsii (Forum): 'Na Vtorom Treke. Rol' Grazhdanskogo Obshchestva i Obshchestvennoi Diplomatii v Dal'neishem Razviti i Rasshirenii Shankhaiskoi Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva'* (Moscow: Institut Stran SNG, 2016), 85–90.

²⁹ “Nachalsya II Etap Operatsii ‘Kanal-2004’” [The Second Phase of Operation Kanal 2004 Has Started], Tsentr Obshchestvennykh Svyazei FSKN Rossii, 16 November 2004.

³⁰ “Iran Privetstvuet Predlozhenie Rossii Po Sozdaniyu Sil Bystrogo Reagirovaniya Na Kaspīi” [Iran Welcomes Russia's Proposal to Create a Rapid Reaction Force in the Caspian], *RIA Novosti*, 6 November 2005; Igor Pugatarev, “Moskva skolachivaet voennyi blok v protivoves Vashingtonu” [Moscow knocks together a military bloc in opposition of Washington], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 January 2006; “Putin i Akhmadinezhad Vystupili Za Sozdanie Na Kaspīi Voenno-Morskoi Gruppy Operativnogo Vzaimodeistviya ‘Kasfor’” [Putin and Akhmadinejad Advocated for the Creation of the Caspian Sea Naval Co-operation Task Group ‘Casfor’], ITAR-TASS, 16 October 2007.

security imperatives have provided a relatively consistent domain for Russia–Iran co-operation in Eurasia, which has allowed the two countries to not only securitise domestic state order, but to also seek greater leverage and legitimacy through diplomatic initiatives and normative projects.

Ideational and Normative Convergence

The convergence in Russian and Iranian understandings of Eurasia manifests not only in the shared emphasis on stability and aversion to the presence of extra-regional powers but also in a commitment to state sovereignty, non-interference and respect for the internal diversity of states. Russia and Iran’s grandiloquent statements about economic and security co-operation within Eurasia co-exist with a fairly consistent narrative directed towards achieving a wider, multipolar global order emphasising the role of non-Western countries and respect for values revolving around state sovereignty.

For Iran, the idea of state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of Eurasian states rose to prominence following the colour revolutions, during which Iran adopted a nearly identical position to that of Russia, China and the states of Central Asia.³¹ From Russia’s perspective, the elevation of sovereignty and non-interference as “the only basis for future stability and security against the destabilization” was “engendered by Western support for regime change”.³² Iran’s experience with domestic protests during the Green Movement further entrenched this normative convergence with Russia as a challenge to the imposition of external standards of legitimacy and efforts to induce internal political change in states.

For Russia, the notion of Greater Eurasia is consistent with its promotion of multipolarity and the transition towards an international order centred on non-Western regional security and economic institutions such as the SCO and the EAEU.³³ Drawing from this Russian discourse on multipolarity, Iran

³¹ Jahangir Karami, “Taḥavvulāt-i Āsiyā-yi Markazī Dar Sāl 1384” [Central Asian Developments in 2005], *Gāhnamāh-i Taḥavvulāt-i Rūsiyab, Āsiyā-yi Markazī, va Qafqāz* (Mu’assasah-i Muṭāla’āt-i Irān va Ūrāsiyā, February 2006); Shahram Fattahi, “Āmrīkā va Inqilāb’hā-yi Rangī Dar Ūrāsiyā” [America and the Colour Revolutions in Eurasia], *Dū Faṣḥnamāh-i IRĀS* 4, no. 4 (Spring and Summer 1388): 75–96.

³² Lewis, “Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy”, 1623.

³³ Alexander Cooley, “Ordering Eurasia: The Rise and Decline of Liberal Internationalism in the Post-Communist Space”, *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (27 May 2019): 588–613, doi:10.1080/09636412.2019.1604988.

envisages a world order where countries like India, Brazil, China and Russia can assume greater roles as regional power centres, thereby diluting the centralisation of power in the West and limiting America's ability to restrain Iran.³⁴ Consequently, Tehran's bilateral and multilateral engagement with Russia in Eurasia aims to promote an alternative set of norms and values in the region and beyond that appear to challenge the basis of the Western-led international order.

The very notion of “Eurasia” itself is not only geographically porous but also historically, culturally and civilisationally amorphous.

Proponents of the notion of Greater Eurasia contend that both Russia and Iran, as well as China and India, have similar geopolitical challenges and goals, including the creation of a multipolar world and opposition to American hegemony.³⁵ Yet, the very notion of “Eurasia” itself is not only geographically porous but also historically, culturally and civilisationally amorphous. This ambiguity offers Russian and Iranian elites a broad political, economic and cultural frame to construct their respective grand narratives that assert each country's centrality in regional processes for both domestic and international consumption.

Conclusion

The relative stability of the Russia–Iran relationship in Eurasia over the past 30 years has been predicated on adherence to an implicit code of conduct where both Moscow and Tehran have respected each other's vital interests in the macro-regional system to mitigate competition and to co-operate on common security challenges. Converging normative perspectives also provide

³⁴ Hanif Ghafari, “Jahān-i Chand Qutbī” [Multipolar World], *Risālat*, 2 September 2008, 21; Banafsheh Gholami, “Jahān-i Chand' qutbī Dar Nigāh-i Sharq va Gharb” [Multipolar World in the Eyes of East and West], *Rūznāmah-i Irān*, 28 September 2014, 21; Yousef Molaie, “Shikast-i Hizhmūnī Dar Jahān-i Chand Qutbī” [Failure of Hegemony in a Multipolar World], *Dunyā-yi Iqtisād*, 24 December 2017, 29.

³⁵ Sergey Karaganov, “S Vostoka na Zapad, ili Bol'shaya Evraziya” [From East to West, or Greater Eurasia], *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 24 October 2016; Andrei Bezrukov et al., “Strasti Po Perimetru” [Passion along the Perimeter], *Kommersant*, 18 January 2016; Timofei Bordachev, “Sozdavaia Evraziu Vmeste” [Creating Eurasia Together], *Izvestiya*, 16 April 2015.

Iran and Russia with a basis for co-operation. Yet, their shared economic ambitions and visions for regional connectivity have not fully materialised, due in part to historical distrust and the nature of their domestic trade structures. As power transitions and structural changes further transform Eurasia into a formidable power centre, Moscow and Tehran will continue to face the inevitable challenge of realising their shared security and economic goals in the region.

From Bilateralism to Multilateralism

Iran's Place in China's Eurasian Projects



Jacopo Scita

Abstract

Thanks to its geographical position and its positive and constructive relationship with China, Iran has a potentially pivotal role within Beijing's Eurasian projection. However, the US administration's decision to reimpose secondary sanctions on Iran seems to have slowed down the country's integration into the emerging Eurasian architecture, causing Tehran to reprioritise bilateral relations with Beijing. This article argues that to mitigate the power imbalance in its relations with China, Iran should keep pushing for integration into China's Belt and Road Initiative and lobbying for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Ultimately, Sino-Iranian relations should be the flywheel for Iran's participation in China-led Eurasian multilateral projects.

In January 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping embarked on a trip that took him through three Middle Eastern capitals — Riyadh, Cairo and, finally, Tehran for a day. The timing of Xi's first visit to the region did not look fortuitous. Indeed, it happened less than a week after the official implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the landmark agreement capping the 12 years of complex negotiations to settle the Iran nuclear issue. Beijing's mediatory role in the nuclear talks with Iran was decisive.¹ In this light, the January 2016 visit was evidently the occasion for Beijing to reassure, and renew its commitments towards, its partners in a region that is becoming increasingly central to China's geopolitical ambitions.

¹ John W Garver, "China and Iran Nuclear Negotiations: Beijing Mediation Effort", in *The Red Star & the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, ed J Reardon-Anderson (London: Hurst & Co, 2018).

While Sino–Iranian relations are often looked at through the lens of Beijing’s voracious demand for oil or the enduring competition between China and the United States, Iran has a clear role in Beijing’s Eurasian projection — a system of economic, infrastructural and institutional connections that links China with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. However, in order to gain the maximum benefit from this emerging inter-regional order, Tehran should push to become fully integrated into the institutional, economic and infrastructural architectures that China, both alone and in concert with Russia and the other regional powers, has been developing to strengthen its westward projection. In short, Iran’s main goal in the medium to long term should be to leverage its positive relationship with China to consolidate its pivotal position in the emerging Eurasian order.

This article looks at the state of Sino–Iranian bilateral relations as the foundation for Tehran’s opportunity to increase its integration into China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Along with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRI and the SCO represent, on different levels, the most important expressions of the Chinese-led Eurasian order. Iran’s still-limited place in these projects appears to be a consequence of the abrupt interruption of the normalisation path opened up by the JCPOA.

The State of Sino–Iranian Relations

President Xi’s 2016 visit to Tehran resulted in the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between China and Iran. CSPs are the highest level in the spectrum of partnerships in China’s foreign policy strategy. In the Persian Gulf, only Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran enjoy this framework of co-operation with Beijing. Enlarging the picture to the whole Middle East and North African region, the only additions to this exclusive club are Algeria and Egypt.² Therefore, the 2016 meeting between President Xi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani marked the official recognition of Iran as a crucial partner for China. On the occasion, 17 memorandums of understanding on areas ranging from the Silk Road to infrastructural, scientific and cultural co-operation were signed by the two

² Jonathan Fulton, “China’s changing role in the Middle East”, Atlantic Council, 5 June 2019, 3–4, <https://atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/china-s-changing-role-in-the-middle-east-2/>.

governments.³ The establishment of the CSP came as the confirmation of both a historical trend, as well as the recognition of a new set of opportunities offered by the JCPOA.

When UN Security Council sanctions against Iran's nuclear programme isolated the country, Iran's dependence on China as an economic lifeline grew quickly.

Diplomatic relations between China and Iran, established when China was admitted into the United Nations in 1971, survived the 1979 Iranian revolution. To some extent, Iran's international isolation following the establishment of the Islamic Republic increased the mutual interest in co-operating. Indeed, China progressively became one of Iran's most important and consistent foreign partners. In the aftermath of the Iraq–Iran war, Tehran found in Beijing a partner keen to participate in the reconstruction of the country. This paved the way for a sustained campaign of multidimensional Chinese infrastructural investments in the country.⁴ However, the scope of co-operation has never been limited to infrastructure development. In fact, during the past 40 years of bilateral relations, China and Iran have established a multisectoral co-operation, ranging from Beijing's crucial assistance with Tehran's nuclear programme to its transfer of scientific expertise and military technology.⁵ Despite some periodic backlashes, Sino–Iranian relations have been remarkably consistent over the years. However, when UN Security Council sanctions against Iran's nuclear programme isolated the country, Iran's dependence on China as an economic lifeline grew quickly. The result

³ “Iran, China sign 17 documents, MoUs”, Official Website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 23 January 2016, <http://president.ir/en/91427>.

⁴ John Calabrese, “China and Iran: Mismatched Partner”, Jamestown Foundation, August 2006, https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2006/08/Jamestown-ChinaIranMismatch_01.pdf?x52813; Scott W Harold and Alireza Nader, “China and Iran. Economic, Political, and Military Relations”, RAND (2012), https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html.

⁵ See Calabrese, “China and Iran”, and John W Garver, *China & Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (University of Washington Press: 2006).

was a substantial reduction of Iran's agency, with China in a position to "dictate the rules of the game".⁶

The JCPOA negotiations — whose final and decisive round coincided with the rise to power of Xi and the launch of the BRI — and its subsequent implementation appeared to be a breakthrough in Sino–Iranian relations. For Iran, the end of international sanctions would have meant the possibility of rebalancing its position vis-à-vis Beijing. For China, a substantial decrease in the risk of escalation in the Persian Gulf and the end of Iran's international isolation would have benefitted its westward ambitions. However, the election of Donald Trump as the 45th US president and the subsequent US withdrawal from the JCPOA abruptly interrupted Iran's renewed ambitions. Despite China — along with the other signatories — remaining committed to and supportive of the JCPOA, Washington's re-imposition of secondary sanctions in November 2018 significantly jeopardised the scope of the deal. Although Beijing continues to buy Iranian oil in defiance of US sanctions,⁷ offering Tehran a lifeline, the current spiral of tensions has inflicted a major blow to Iran's ability to relaunch its partnership with China along the more balanced lines anticipated by the CSP.

Indeed, the fundamental feature of Sino–Iranian relations is the power imbalance that is typical of any great power–middle power partnership.⁸ Iran's international isolation has proved to increase this power asymmetry, creating dangerous phases of economic overdependence on China. The opportunity to mitigate Iran's overdependence on China could come from the progressive inclusion of Iran within the Chinese-led Eurasian integration projects. In other words, Tehran's agency vis-à-vis Beijing will grow only if Iran is able, and will be allowed, to occupy its pivotal place along the New Silk Road and successfully claim a full membership seat in the SCO.

⁶ Anoush Ehteshami et al, "Chinese–Iranian mutual strategic perceptions", *The China Journal*, 79 (2018): 6–7.

⁷ "Iran's oil export claims not without foundations says Tankertrackers.com", bne Intellinews, 2 December 2019, <https://www.intellinews.com/iran-s-oil-export-claims-not-without-foundation-says-tankertrackers-com-172638/>.

⁸ Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Great Power–Middle Power Dynamics: The Case of China and Iran", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28 (2019).

Iran and the BRI: Claiming Tehran's Pivotal Position

Undoubtedly, the BRI represents one of the most ambitious geopolitical, infrastructural and economic projects of the 21st century. Launched in 2013 by Xi, the project quickly became the new Chinese leadership's global blueprint. The ambitions underlying the BRI have never been hidden. According to the official Chinese vision, "the initiative aims to promote orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets by enhancing connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent areas".⁹

Within the BRI project, Iran occupies a pivotal position. Tehran is one of the main hubs of the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, one of the routes that form the web of land links in the New Silk Road. In particular, the West Asia Economic Corridor has strong strategic relevance in itself because it allows China to reach the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea without passing through Russia.¹⁰ The strategic location of Iran is even more evident, considering the country's potential to become China's access door to the entire Middle Eastern market. All things considered, by including Iran in the emerging Eurasian order, China will achieve a stronger regional position, while promoting its alternative, more comprehensive view of global affairs. The exclusion of Iran from this order would mean excluding a country that is located at the historical, geographical and economic centre of Eurasia. Such an option appears highly counterproductive for an actor that is shaping its leadership position in the region and building a westward strategy which has Eurasia at its centre.

Having said that, it should not come as a surprise that, on the occasion of the launch of the CSP, Xi reframed the relationship between China and Iran as part of the multilateral vision developed by the BRI framework.¹¹ This vision appears to have been well received by Iranian officials. For instance,

⁹ "China unveils action plan on Belt and Road Initiative", *China Daily*, 28 March 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-03/28/content_19938124.htm.

¹⁰ Thomas Erdbrink, "For China's global ambitions, 'Iran is at the center of everything'", *The New York Times*, 25 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/middleeast/iran-china-business-ties.html>

¹¹ "Full text of Xi's signed article on Iranian newspaper", *China Daily*, 21 January 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/21/content_23189585.htm.

during his last visit to China in August 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif reiterated that the BRI helped to enhance mutual trust between China and Iran, suggesting that the initiative is a “manifestation of the fact that the two countries’ co-operation is now entering a new phase”.¹² What appears clear, then, is that the BRI has the potential to redefine the framework of co-operation between China and Iran. However, this enormous potential is still largely unexpressed.

By including Iran in the emerging Eurasian order, China will achieve a stronger regional position, while promoting its alternative, more comprehensive view of global affairs.

Despite its economic power and geopolitical ambitions, China has not been able to realise its BRI agenda quickly enough, in part because its attention has been diverted by its ongoing trade war with the US. Beijing’s score in delivering large BRI infrastructural projects remains mixed. For instance, while the first freight trains from China reached the United Kingdom in 2017, passing through Kazakhstan in Central Asia,¹³ several Asian countries are experiencing delays in the delivery of BRI-related infrastructural projects.¹⁴ Furthermore, the countries and regions that the BRI aims to connect are undergoing a considerably high level of political tensions. While the Chinese strategy of offering loans and investments to pave the way for its geopolitical project is attractive, local tensions in some places have been reoriented towards

¹² “FM Zarif says shared vision binds Iran-China relations”, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 25 August 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83450928/FM-Zarif-says-shared-vision-binds-Iran-China-relations>.

¹³ “First freight train from China arrives in London”, BBC News, 18 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-38667988/first-freight-train-from-china-arrives-in-london>.

¹⁴ See Tamara Vaal, “Kazakh president orders investigation into China-linked transport project”, Reuters, 8 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-president-railway-probe/kazakh-president-orders-investigation-into-china-linked-transport-project-idUSKBN1WN1CC>; Kosh Raj Koirala, “Nepal–China railway plans hit a dead end”, *Asia Times*, 18 July 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/07/nepal-china-railway-plans-hit-a-dead-end/>; Go Yamada and Stefania Palma, “Is China’s Belt and Road Initiative working? A progress report from eight countries”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 28 March 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/Is-China-s-Belt-and-Road-working-A-progress-report-from-eight-countries>.

China, which could lead to some of China's infrastructure projects stalling.¹⁵ Given this situation, it seems that the full inclusion of Iran in the BRI has been slowed down. And, the pressure of secondary sanctions on Iran will only further delay the process.

In these circumstances, Tehran's agency in its relationship with China appears to remain limited. However, Iran's pivotal positioning in China's westward projection is stable. Acknowledging this reality and attuning policymaking to it is a necessary first step. In this regard, Iran should focus on developing "policy coordination, promotion of free trade, people to people interaction [and] financial integration"¹⁶ with China to effectively extend the scope of the BRI beyond infrastructural development. If Iran is successful in creating an environment that expands and favours sustained, wide-ranging co-operation with China, this is likely to have a positive impact even on Tehran's full integration into the SCO.

The SCO: Institutionalising Iran's Place in Eurasia

The SCO was founded in 2001 as the continuation of the Shanghai Five, a Chinese-led organisation aimed at addressing cross-border issues. With the launch of the US-led global war on terror and the presence of US troops in Afghanistan, Beijing and Moscow, the two main members of the original Shanghai Five, recognised the security potential of a more institutionalised regional organisation.¹⁷ The founding declaration of the SCO, however, carries a broader series of goals, ranging from regional peace and stability and strengthening mutual trust to pursuing multisectoral co-operation among the members.¹⁸ Therefore, it appears clear that, since its establishment, the SCO has had ambitions of opening a path for economic integration between

¹⁵ Bradley Jardine, "Why are there anti-China protests in Central Asia?", *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/16/why-are-there-anti-china-protests-central-asia/>.

¹⁶ Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran–China Cooperation in the Silk Road Economic Belt: From Strategic Understanding to Operational Understanding", *China & World Economy* 25, no. 5 (2017): 58.

¹⁷ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Ideology and Realpolitik in Iranian Foreign Policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2014): 3, doi: 10.1080/10357718.2014.934195.

¹⁸ "Shanghai Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO", Official Website of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2001, <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>.

China, Russia and the four Central Asian republics. In 2017, India and Pakistan were admitted as members of the organisation, marking a spectacular expansion of the SCO. As Russian President Vladimir Putin noted during the 2018 Qingdao Summit, the organisation comprises “one fourth of the world’s GDP, 43 per cent of the international population and 23 per cent of global territory”.¹⁹

Since the Trump administration hardened America’s Iran policy, Tehran seems to have renewed its interest in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation ... Yet, notwithstanding both China and Russia’s apparent commitment to promoting Iran’s full membership, the process remains stuck.

Iran obtained observer status in the SCO in 2005 and has officially applied for full membership. As extensively described by Shahram Akbarzadeh, Iran’s push for full integration into the organisation was a distinctive geostrategic priority of the Ahmadinejad government.²⁰ This position was mainly built on the idea that the SCO was a counterweight to and bulwark against US attempts to strengthen its position in Central and East Asia. It is worth noting that Ahmadinejad’s era was that of the “Sinicisation” of the Iranian domestic market — a forced consequence of international sanctions but also an attempt to distance Iran from the West while favouring its eastward projection.²¹ However, the troubled domestic and international image of the Ahmadinejad presidency did not appeal to SCO members, who froze Iran’s application in accordance with an organisation rule that blocks the admission of countries under UN sanctions.²²

¹⁹ “Putin: SCO could achieve bigger goals”, *China News Service*, 6 June 2018, <http://www.ecns.cn/news/politics/2018-06-06/detail-ifuyyvvz3223815.shtml>.

²⁰ Akbarzadeh, “Iran”, 8.

²¹ See Ehteshami et al, “Chinese–Iranian”.

²² Jiao Wu and Xiaokun Li, “SCO agrees deal to expand”, *China Daily*, 12 June 2010, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-06/12/content_9968565.htm.

The election of Hassan Rouhani as successor to Ahmadinejad marked an important shift in Tehran's strategic priorities. Indeed, the new government reprioritised dialogue with the West and, in particular, with the European Union. As Kaveh Afrasiabi and Seyedrasoul Mousavi write, the Rouhani administration adopted a more nuanced “both East and West” strategy.²³ To some extent, this shift — along with the administration's strong focus on the JCPOA negotiations — detracted from Iran's lobbying effort to obtain full SCO membership. However, since the Trump administration hardened America's Iran policy, Tehran seems to have renewed its interest in the organisation, considering the SCO an example of multilateralism in contrast to Washington's unilateralism.²⁴ Yet, notwithstanding both China and Russia's apparent commitment to promoting Iran's full membership,²⁵ the process remains stuck.

Despite clear differences, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani's approaches to the SCO show a constant. So far, it appears that Iran's seesawing interest in the organisation is due to external push factors. However, even as international isolation has pushed Tehran towards its Eastern partners, the country has prioritised its bilateral relations with China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. Although this position reflects the short-term necessity of establishing more solid economic and political lifelines, in the medium and long terms, Iran should re-centre its posture towards the SCO's pull factors. Indeed, the organisation offers a framework of institutionalised co-operation that, arguably, will constitute the backbone of future Eurasian governance. Furthermore, as pointed out by Jonathan Fulton, Iran's full membership in the SCO could have a domino effect, enticing other Middle Eastern countries into the organisation, which could put Iran in the driver's seat of the SCO's

²³ Kaveh Afrasiabi and Seyedrasoul Mousavi, “A Power Shift To The East: Iran and the SCO”, *LobeLog*, 7 June 2018, <https://lobelog.com/a-power-shift-to-the-east-iran-and-the-sco/>.

²⁴ See “Iran urges SCO states to promote multilateralism”, *Financial Tribune*, 1 November 2019, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/100566/iran-urges-sco-states-to-promote-multilateralism/>; and Pepe Escobar, “Iran at the center of Eurasian riddle”, *Asia Times*, 17 June 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/06/iran-at-the-center-of-the-eurasian-riddle/>.

²⁵ See “Xi Jinping meets with President Hassan Rouhani of Iran”, Embassy of the PRC in the USA, 14 June 2019, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1673196.htm>; and “Rouhani: More dialogue needed with Russia after US nuclear deal exit”, *Tehran Times*, 9 June 2018, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/424283/Rouhani-More-dialogue-needed-with-Russia-after-U-S-nuclear>.

westward expansion.²⁶ In the best-case scenario, this could offer a further platform for institutionalised dialogue between Tehran and the other Persian Gulf countries.

Conclusion

Relations between China and Iran are often understood as a function of the China–US–Iran triangle or of Beijing’s energy security strategy. Despite both these elements being part of the complex reality that characterises the Sino–Iranian partnership, China’s growing westward ambitions have shown that Iran could have a pivotal position in the future of Eurasia. Indeed, looking East is not only “an opportunity for an alternative future and trajectory [and] a shortcut to prosperity”²⁷ but also represents for Iran the possibility of gaining renewed political and economic centrality. Iran’s good relationship with Beijing could function as a flywheel to increase the country’s level of integration in the emerging Chinese-led Eurasian order. Even though the US withdrawal from the JCPOA has undermined the positive momentum that was emerging in 2016, Iran should keep working to obtain full membership in the SCO. Indeed, Iran’s renewed international isolation consequent to Washington’s stepped-up “maximum pressure” campaign — which is likely to increase in intensity if the JCPOA falls apart without an alternative agreement in place — is again pushing Iran towards China. As was the case before the JCPOA, China will once again be in the position of dictating the rules of the game to Tehran. Therefore, lobbying for greater integration into the Eurasian multilateral order is one of Iran’s best options to mitigate the imbalance of power in its current bilateral relations with China. At the same time, the growing Chinese interest in the Persian Gulf and the development of the BRI may create a new platform of economic opportunities, infrastructural integration and dialogue that could eventually promote the emergence of an alternative security architecture involving Iran and its neighbours.

²⁶ Jonathan Fulton, “Could the SCO expand into the Middle East?”, *The Diplomat*, 24 February 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/could-the-sco-expand-into-the-middle-east/>.

²⁷ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Gawdat Bahgat, “Iran’s Asianisation Strategy”, in *Iran Looking East: An Alternative to the EU?* ed Annalisa Perteghella, (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2019).

Connectivity and Chabahar

The Eurasian Future of India's Iran Policy



Sumitha Narayanan Kutty

Abstract

The idea of engaging Iran through the lens of Eurasia is not alien to India's foreign policy. Even as sanctions debilitate its energy dealings with Iran, India's connectivity strategy through the Iranian port of Chabahar is designed to further its interests in Eurasia (particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asia). This paper traces India's shifting priorities vis-à-vis Iran: reduced dealings in energy, limited security interactions and a renewed focus on land and maritime connectivity initiatives. It finds that — intentionally or not — the future of the India–Iran relationship is strongly intertwined with the Eurasian sphere, given its bet on connectivity.

At first glance, 2019 was not a great year for India–Iran ties. India decided to roll back its imports of Iranian crude to zero to comply with fresh sanctions by the United States under the Trump administration.¹ The India–Iran relationship has traditionally banked on energy, which constituted a major portion of bilateral trade. Yet, despite this setback, Indian officials paid numerous visits to Iran over 2019 — the most significant being the one by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar as the year came to a close. With a severely constrained energy relationship, was there enough substance left for India and Iran to work on?

In the past two decades, limited institutional engagement, divergent strategic interests and India's rapprochement with the United States are some factors that have shaped India's bilateral relations with Iran. This paper examines India's shifting priorities vis-à-vis Iran and the emergence of

¹ Nidhi Verma, "India's Nov oil imports down 6% from Oct — trade data", Reuters, 23 December 2019. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/india-oil-imports/table-indias-nov-oil-imports-down-6-from-oct-trade-data-idUKL4N28X2R8>.

connectivity, particularly the Chabahar port project in Iran, which helps link India to the economies of Afghanistan and Central Asia. This evolution cements India's place in Iran's Eurasian future.

New Delhi has traditionally viewed its dealings with Iran as an extension of its subcontinental interactions to its west; that is, it sees Iran as a part of its immediate neighbourhood extending beyond Pakistan and Afghanistan.² This framing sets India's interactions with Iran apart from the popular paradigm situating the latter solely within the Middle East, in a hitherto unspecified de-hyphenation of sorts. The idea of viewing Iran through the Eurasian context is, therefore, not alien to Indian foreign policy. In fact, it has been the norm. India's evolving engagement of Iran is also powered by this logic, with the Modi government's emphasis on land and maritime connectivity projects through Iran to the economies of Eurasia.

Recasting India–Iran Ties Amid Shifting Priorities

India's interactions with Iran are rooted in centuries-old social, political and economic ties, and the two states formalised diplomatic ties in 1950. Government officials often allude to these long-held “historical and civilisational links” even though the phrase papers over the limited nature of their contemporary engagement. The India–Iran relationship has always seen low levels of institutionalisation, with interactions limited to one or two areas of co-operation at any given time.³ The two sides have often viewed each other with a certain amount of distrust. Events that have upset consecutive Indian governments include the decision by the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to ally with the US through the “Baghdad Pact” (or the Central Treaty Organisation, Cento) in 1955 and his statements in support of Pakistan against Indian “aggression” in the 1965 and 1971 India–Pakistan wars.⁴ Even a very popular state visit by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1974

² This linkage is also reflected in the practice of India's foreign policy. Most significantly, the Ministry of External Affairs includes Iran within its most critical division focusing on Pakistan and Afghanistan (“PAI” in short).

³ This is in sharp contrast to India's relations with the Arab Gulf states. Additionally, a mere 4,000 Indians live in Iran. Saudi Arabia and the UAE each hosts 3 million Indians.

⁴ Sujata Ashwarya Cheema, *India–Iran Relations: Progress, Problems and Prospects* (New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2016), 31.

focused on a favourable crude oil agreement for India and did little to widen the ambit of engagement.

The 1979 Islamic revolution was viewed with cautious optimism in India as Iran's attempt to break free from "outside Big Power influence",⁵ and New Delhi welcomed Iran's subsequent withdrawal from Cento and its support for the Non-Aligned Movement. Despite some mutual interest in engagement, the new Islamic regime's support for Pakistan on the Kashmir issue deterred better relations. The two did, however, manage to establish the Indo-Iranian Joint Commission in 1983 with a view to improving economic ties. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 prompted greater pragmatism in Indian strategic thought. In 1993, Narasimha Rao became the first Indian prime minister to visit Iran since the revolution, opening up further engagement through numerous bilateral visits. Iran reciprocated by softening its demands for Kashmir's independence.

India and Iran's course of engagement over energy has never run smooth. This remained the case even after the Iran nuclear deal.

This decade set the stage for the warmest phase of India-Iran co-operation, which culminated in the Tehran declaration (2001) and the New Delhi declaration (2003). Both aimed to diversify ties into a multi-vectored strategic partnership with ambitious goals across the energy, defence and trade sectors as well as regional connectivity. The two stepped up political, security and intelligence co-ordination in Afghanistan, assisting the Northern Alliance in toppling the Taliban government in 2001. Soon after, however, India's multiple votes at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) against Iran's controversial nuclear programme and India's negotiations with the US on its own nuclear deal stalled further strategic engagement. For the next decade or so, Indian interactions with Iran were limited to energy trade, which was closely linked to and affected by sanctions against Iran by the

⁵ "Annual Report 1979-1980", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 22.

Obama administration until 2015, when the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) was concluded.

Since the Modi government first came to power in mid-2014, there have been three noteworthy movements in India's Iran policy. These developments are largely congruent with the goals of previous administrations but also reflect the new influence of sanctions imposed after US President Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018.

Reduced Energy Trade

The first noteworthy movement was New Delhi's effort to reduce its dependence on Iranian crude even though Washington had granted conditional waivers in the 2012 round of sanctions. This was prudent in hindsight, given that the Trump administration not only re-introduced sanctions after its withdrawal from the JCPOA but also proceeded to impose a harsher "zero imports" policy on all customers of Iranian crude, including its partners such as India. Until 2018, Iran was India's third-biggest supplier after Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Bilateral trade between the two countries stood at US\$17 billion in 2018–19 although a significant drop is expected in these figures for 2019–20, given India's greatly reduced crude oil imports.⁶

India's steady focus on diversification made its decision to comply with Trump's sanctions relatively less painful than the adjustments it had had to make in the 2012 round of sanctions.⁷ Diversification was helped by the changing realities of the energy market and India's own relationships with some of the Arab Gulf states (mainly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia), which provided swift substitutes from within the Middle East. But, more significantly, India and Iran's course of engagement over energy has never run smooth. This remained the case even after the Iran nuclear deal.⁸

⁶ Export Import Data Bank, Department of Commerce, Government of India, <https://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/iecntq.asp>.

⁷ The Modi government cautioned its refineries to reduce imports and take stock of the risks of doing business in Iran months before sanctions snapped back in November 2018. Nidhi Verma, "India preparing to cut oil imports from Iran after US action", Reuters, 28 June 2018, <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-iran-oil/exclusive-india-preparing-for-cut-in-oil-imports-from-iran-sources-idINKBN1JO18A>.

⁸ Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, "Rouhani's visit a reality check for Iran–India relations", *AL-Monitor*, 6 March 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/iran-india-ties-rouhani-state-visit-chabahar-farzad-jcpoa.html>.

For example, India reduced oil imports from Iran in 2017 to signal displeasure over the delay in development rights for an Iranian gas field, Farzad B, which had been under discussion for over a decade.⁹ India's frustration over Iran's bargaining tactics certainly played a part in its decision to forgo oil imports from Iran as a trade-off for concessions or benefits from the US. Subsequently, the energy pillar in this relationship shrank significantly.

Limited Security Co-operation

The second shift in the India–Iran relationship was in the security dimension. Military co-operation between the two took the biggest hit in the past two decades following India's decision to align its strategic and security interests with the US. Defence diplomacy between India and Iran continues, with minor exercises and the odd ship visit. More significantly, a widening disconnect became evident as far as their strategic interests in Afghanistan were concerned. Unlike the Indians, the Iranians view the American presence in Afghanistan as part of the problem. Additionally, the Iranian regime's policy of engagement with the Taliban and the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in terror strikes affecting India, most notably the attack on an Israeli diplomat in New Delhi in 2012, further weakened security ties.¹⁰

Renewed Focus on Connectivity Projects

The third noteworthy development in the India–Iran relationship is India's prioritisation of transit and connectivity projects in its neighbourhood. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) certainly drives a part of India's own connectivity spree but these project ideas predate the BRI. To India's west, this drive has translated into renewed, sustained discussions on maritime and land connectivity to strengthen India's economic ties with Eurasia. Such

⁹ The field was exclusively assigned to an Indian firm, Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) Videsh Ltd, which discovered it in 2008. However, Iran opened it up to international bidding, claiming that the Indians failed to deliver on financial commitments. The Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline is a second venture rendered redundant owing to New Delhi's security and financial concerns. Additionally, talks over a direct undersea Iran–India LNG pipeline remain stalled. Nidhi Verma, "India cuts oil import plans from Iran by a quarter over gas field row", Reuters, 2 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-iran-oil/india-cuts-oil-import-plans-from-iran-by-a-quarter-over-gas-field-row-idUSKBN17Y1DR>.

¹⁰ Neeraj Chauhan, "Cops name Iran military arm for attack on Israeli diplomat", *Times of India*, 30 July 2012, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Cops-name-Iran-military-arm-for-attack-on-Israeli-diplomat/articleshow/15263013.cms>.

discussions involve Afghanistan, Iran and Oman, apart from a wider circle of Central Asian states and Russia. But Iran's role is central to India's ambitions in Eurasia, and the latter's goal of upgrading the Iranian port of Chabahar is critical in this.

Chabahar: India's Place in Iran's Eurasian Future

India's road to Eurasia lies through Iran. More specifically, India's strategy involves developing Chabahar, which is located in the south-eastern Iranian province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan, and linking it to its own western ports (eg, Kandla in the state of Gujarat and Mumbai) as well as building new rail links connecting Chabahar to Afghanistan. The idea was first proposed during bilateral deliberations in 2000, based on the enduring logic that the most viable land route to connect India to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe is through Iran. Pakistan's denial of access through its territory drives India's interest in this venture. The proposal to develop Chabahar gained renewed momentum in 2012, when then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh initiated discussions with Iran and Afghanistan. Despite sanctions against Iran at the time, the Obama administration backed the project, stating that it was grounded in the logic of promoting regional trade and furthering Afghanistan's economic development. A second factor driving India's interest in the project by this point was China's investments in developing a deep-sea port at Gwadar in Pakistan, about 70 km east of Chabahar.

India's strategy involves developing Chabahar, which is located in the south-eastern Iranian province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan, and linking it to its own western ports ... as well as building new rail links connecting Chabahar to Afghanistan.

As soon as nuclear negotiations between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany (the P5+1) took a positive turn in 2015, India kicked off serious discussions on Chabahar. A contract for the development of the port was finalised during Modi's visit to Tehran in May 2016. Modi and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, signalled that strategic connectivity projects would define the India-Iran

partnership in this phase of renewed engagement after the JCPOA.¹¹ According to the original terms of the Chabahar contract, India would spend US\$500 million to develop and upgrade two existing berths into container and multi-purpose cargo terminals and close to US\$85 million to equip and operate them under a 10-year lease.

What both countries did not anticipate at the time was Trump's election as US president that same year. With it came the disintegration of the JCPOA and, by mid-2018, the reinstatement of sanctions against Iran. In a significant move, Washington granted New Delhi an exemption to the Chabahar project even as it demanded that India completely halt crude oil imports from Iran. However, American verbal assurances on the exemption of the Chabahar project did not translate into positive movement on the ground.

Setbacks to Original Port Plans

Chabahar's development was not proceeding according to India's original plans owing to the risks of doing business in Iran.¹² First, the contracts that were awarded to foreign firms (Chinese, Italian and Finnish) for cranes and other port equipment could not proceed after banks refused to accept America's verbal assurances regarding the exemption of Chabahar from sanctions. Second, the state-owned entity created to execute India's foreign port projects like Chabahar — India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) — was unable to get an Indian private firm on board to operate the terminals on the short 10-year lease. A third challenge that India faced in particular was that the terms of the contract were changed by Iran in “very fundamental ways” at least three times in the first three years. Expressing his frustration on this matter before he assumed the position of external affairs minister, S Jaishankar remarked: “In the case of Chabahar, I know we always like to beat up on

¹¹ “India–Iran Joint Statement: ‘Civilisational Connect, Contemporary Context’ during the visit of Prime Minister to Iran”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 23 May 2016, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26843/India__Iran_Joint_Statement__quot_Civilisational_Connect_Contemporary_Contextquot_during_the_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Iran.

¹² Data released by the Modi government in 2019 proved that India had not spent any of its allocated project funds between 2017 and 2019. Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, “India's Iran port plans languish despite US waiver”, *Bourse & Bazaar*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/8/28/indias-iran-port-plans-languish-despite-us-exemption>.

ourselves. But to be very honest a lot of the problems were because the Iranians kept changing the terms of the agreement.”¹³

To combat the problems plaguing the project, India and Iran resorted to stopgap measures to sustain the port’s development. Iran upgraded a part of the port at its own expense by December 2017 and an inauguration ceremony was held with much fanfare, with leaders from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan in attendance. As far as the Iranian regime was concerned, this showcased Chabahar as a success story amid an increasingly acrimonious economic and political climate.¹⁴ In a second stopgap measure, an Iranian port operator took over interim operation of the port in 2018 until an Indian firm was ready to step in.

A third challenge that India faced in particular was that the terms of the [Chabahar] contract were changed by Iran in “very fundamental ways” at least three times in the first three years.

The Modi government appears determined to not let the project slide into ignominy. Officials have maintained a dialogue with the Trump administration on the port’s significance, the need for continuing waivers and the real limitations of a verbal assurance on this matter. During his visit to Washington in December 2019, Jaishankar negotiated a written assurance from the US on financial transactions pertaining to Chabahar in order to conclude much-delayed purchases of equipment.¹⁵ If this works, the deadlock would end and the port’s upgrade could proceed.

¹³ Dinakar Peri, “Chabahar port project delayed due to Iran: Jaishankar”, *The Hindu*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/chabahar-port-project-delayed-due-to-iran-jaishankar/article24455469.ece>.

¹⁴ “Rouhani inaugurates port dubbed ‘International Gateway’”, *Financial Tribune*, 3 December 2017, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/77292/rouhani-inaugurates-port-dubbed-international-gateway>.

¹⁵ P Manoj, “Chabahar port: US gives ‘written’ assurance to India facilitating banks to fund \$85 mn equipment purchase”, *The Hindu Business Line*, 25 December 2019, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/logistics/us-gives-written-assurances-to-india-in-a-big-push-to-chabahar-port-plan/article30393995.ece>.

Connecting Chabahar to Eurasia

The success of India's Eurasia strategy does not revolve only around developing Chabahar Port. First, New Delhi launched a diplomatic push across the region to connect Chabahar by land to Afghanistan and Central Asia in the north and by sea to Oman in the south. This effort is critical to ensure the port's viability and guarantee trade benefits to the Indian economy.

A simultaneous trans-regional conversation has ensued to connect Chabahar to existing and upcoming regional transit frameworks. The first such discussion revolves around a crucial piece of connectivity that is tied to the Chabahar project. When Modi and Rouhani endorsed the Chabahar contract in 2016, India, Iran and Afghanistan formalised a trilateral transit agreement at the same time. The three states hope to ease cross-border transit and transport regulations to fast track the movement of goods through existing roadways connecting Chabahar to the Afghan border town of Zaranj (via Zahedan). This route has been operational since October 2017, with Indian and Afghan shipments making their way from the port of Kandla to Afghanistan via Chabahar. Iran has also been developing a new railway route between the port and Zahedan, with some help expected from India down the line.

Second, the port is an integral part of India's Central Asia policy. The inaugural India–Central Asia Dialogue was hosted by Uzbekistan in January 2019, with all Central Asian states in attendance, along with Afghanistan.¹⁶ The Indian external affairs minister's address here noted the country's joint efforts with Iran and Afghanistan to develop Chabahar and highlighted the potential of the new routes to further connectivity and trade with Central Asia. India also encouraged Central Asian participation at the "Chabahar Day International Conference" held in February 2019 to boost the port city's development.

A third larger regional framework that Chabahar will be plugged into is the "Ashgabat Agreement", which India acceded to in 2018. The agreement facilitates the movement of goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf,

¹⁶ Among the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has shown particular interest in the Chabahar project. "Press Statement by EAM after First India–Central Asia Dialogue", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 13 January 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?30907/Press+Statement+by+EAM+after+First+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue>.

and the parties to it include Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Iran and Oman. In keeping with this focus, India has improved maritime connectivity with Oman and held trilateral deliberations with Iran as well.¹⁷ Finally, Chabahar is also a key link in the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which when completed would become the shortest route between India and Russia.

Whether intended or not, the future of India's engagement with Iran is strongly intertwined with that of the Eurasian sphere, given its bet on connectivity.

India's Eurasian strategy clearly depends on Iran, which is also New Delhi's gateway to Central Asia.¹⁸ As discussed previously, there appear to be two important elements to this evolving strategy. The first consists of hardware such as the Chabahar Port project, which links the region physically to India. The Modi government believes the port is the “fulcrum of connectivity” to Central Asia and the answer to the lack of efficient overland transit routes.¹⁹ The second element is the software that supports such tangibles, ie, political initiatives like the India–Central Asia Dialogue and economic capital in terms of lines of credit, buyers' credit, etc, that India has extended to the region either bilaterally or through existing regional initiatives.

Setting aside the BRI, the Eurasian landscape reveals numerous competing initiatives — some less formalised than others — like the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the European Union's new Central Asia strategy (2019). India became a full member of the SCO in 2017 and “welcome(s) greater participation of

¹⁷ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “India, Oman sign maritime pact; foreign ministers of India–Oman–Iran meet in Muscat,” *Times of India*, 24 December 2019, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/72960154.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

¹⁸ Meena Singh Roy, “Iran: India's Gateway to Central Asia,” *Strategic Analysis* 36, No. 6, 2012, 957–975.

¹⁹ “Address by External Affairs Minister on the occasion of the launch of the India–Central Asia Business Council, FICCI”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 6 February 2020, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32365address+by+external+affairs+minister+on+the+occasion+of+the+launch+of+the+indiacentral+asia+business+ council+ficci+february+06+2020>.

SCO” in the INSTC, for instance.²⁰ It also intends to negotiate a free trade agreement with the EEU.²¹ New Delhi’s strategy, therefore, has been to further its own interests by coordinating and contributing to existing Eurasian ideas and institutions.

Conclusion

The contours of India’s engagement with Iran have certainly shifted away from energy. This change also signals the way ahead in their relationship. Their collaboration over connectivity projects is the sector that will work for India in the short-to-medium term. To be sure, the India–Iran relationship has not been without its moments of severe inconvenience for India on energy dealings and Iran’s regional behaviour. But India’s long-standing logic of viewing Iran as an extension of the subcontinent to its west adds to its strategy an interesting element of de-hyphenation from the rest of the Middle East, ie, the Arab Gulf states, thereby ensuring that some of its interests remain alive. Whether intended or not, the future of India’s engagement with Iran is strongly intertwined with that of the Eurasian sphere, given its bet on connectivity. As with most large-scale regional connectivity ventures, the pace remains slow but appears to be steering towards a stated end. The Chabahar Port project, and its key role in the region’s transit frameworks, cements India’s place in Iran’s Eurasian future.

²⁰ “Address by Secretary (West) during industry interaction with Mr Vladimir Norov, Secretary General, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at FICCI”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 13 January 2020, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32308/address+by+secretary+west+during+industry+interaction+with+mr+vladimir+norov+secretary+general+shanghai+cooperation+organisation+at+ficci+january+13+2020>.

²¹ “Russia hopeful of India’s free trade pact with EAEU”, *The Hindu*, 24 December 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/russia-hopeful-of-indias-free-trade-pact-with-caeu/article30384075.ece>.

Iran's Centrality in Europe's Emerging Eurasian Policy



Axel Hellman

Abstract

European leaders are placing a greater emphasis on foreign policy. The experience of the Iran nuclear agreement, which European leaders have tried to sustain in spite of the unilateral US withdrawal from it, has laid bare both the ambitions as well as the shortcomings of European diplomacy. As Europe re-evaluates its role in the world, it may find itself operating in a more Eurasian context. Iran has been central both in the transformation of European strategic thinking as well as in preparing European leaders for pursuing their interests in a Eurasian context.

European diplomacy is going through a transformative phase as the continent's leaders seek new ways to protect European interests and values in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. There is a new assertiveness in European foreign policy. Through its high-stakes diplomatic battle to sustain the Iran nuclear agreement, Europe has learnt the lesson of geopolitics the hard way. But the episode has also compelled European leaders to double down on their commitment to multilateral diplomacy. In this important sense, Iran has been central in preparing Europe to pursue a more assertive diplomacy in the Eurasian context.

Europe's Turn to Geopolitics

Something is brewing in European politics. A set of new ideas has risen to the forefront of the political debate in European capitals and around European institutions. While European politics was largely consumed by domestic affairs over the last decade — a development that was in many ways the logical result of the global financial crisis, a crippling economic downturn, and waves of economic and political unrest that also reflected damaging and

widespread Euroscepticism — the continent’s leaders are now increasingly shifting their focus overseas.

As a result, a number of new concepts have permeated European diplomacy. “Strategic autonomy” remains a contentious concept but can generally be said to concern the pursuit of a greater European ability to act in a coordinated and, where needed, independent fashion. It is underpinned by the idea of “European sovereignty” — the right of Europe to pursue its goals and interests irrespective of unilateral moves by other actors.¹

European leaders have realised that they often lack the means to promote and protect their interests and as a result struggle to stand up for the values that they wish to project — multilateralism and diplomacy built on engagement and “principled pragmatism”.

These ideas remain nascent, have no universally accepted interpretations, and have yet to be translated into more specific doctrines — and, above all, into concrete action. But they are remarkable in the sense that they have put the onus firmly on Europe’s collective ability to act in the international arena. As a result, the idea that Europe not only could but should also increase its clout externally is increasingly accepted — not least at the level of the European Union. Ursula von der Leyen, the new president of the European Commission, has declared the establishment of a “geopolitical commission” and speaks of strengthening the continent’s role as a global leader. In important ways, this development is a reaction to external events rather than part of a natural trajectory. European leaders are coming to terms with the fact that they are facing unprecedented global competition from foes as well as greater unpredictability and unreliability from partners.

Russia, the traditional focus of European security policy, has become increasingly assertive and disruptive. The relationship with Moscow has had

¹ Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj and Axel Hellman, “Europe, Iran, and Economic Sovereignty: A New Banking Architecture in Response to US Sanctions”, European Leadership Network/ Bourse & Bazaar, June 2018, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Europe-Iran-and-Economic-Sovereignty-07062018-updated-08062018.pdf>, 5.

a significant impact on strategic thinking across Europe over the last few years.² Meanwhile, China is emerging as a force which is not only increasingly shaping global events but is also making inroads into Europe, including through strategic investments. And, arguably of greatest impact, Europe is faced with a fraying transatlantic partnership.

In this competitive environment, European leaders have realised that they often lack the means to promote and protect their interests and as a result struggle to stand up for the values that they wish to project — multilateralism and diplomacy built on engagement and “principled pragmatism”.³

This is clearly not the first time that European leaders have openly declared their interest in assuming greater international responsibilities. Nor is it the first time in modern history that they have re-evaluated their strategic relationships, including with their closest partners, as the vigorous disagreements over the invasion of Iraq demonstrated. But the current developments signal a serious intent to find a new role for Europe amid tectonic shifts in the international geopolitical environment. As the EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, pointed out in a recent article: “This should be the year that Europe gets traction with a geopolitical approach, escaping the fate of being a player in search of its identity.”⁴

The Emerging Eurasian Vector in European Foreign Policy

As Europe seeks to carve out a more proactive role in international affairs to protect its values and interests, new opportunities are opening up for European diplomacy. One landmark achieved is the new trade agreement with Japan, which entered into force in early 2019 and created the world’s largest free trade zone. At the same time, the growing influence of China is compelling

² Axel Hellman, “How has Russian geostrategic thinking towards Russia shifted since 2014?”, European Leadership Network, July 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/how-has-european-geostrategic-thinking-towards-russia-shifted-since-2014/>.

³ “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy”, EU External Action Service, June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf, 8.

⁴ Josep Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, Project Syndicate, 8 February 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/embracing-europe-s-power-by-josep-borrell-2020-02>.

European leaders to develop coherent responses that balance the investment and trade opportunities that China offers with the security risks stemming from an autocratic leadership.

When the EU rolled out its new strategy for Central Asia in 2019, it emphasised that the region “has a century-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together” and that Central Asian countries “have renewed this role for the region since attaining independence”.

The EU’s willingness to strengthen relations with Asian countries was manifested in its 2018 strategy of connecting Europe and Asia. Yet, the idea of pulling Europe and Asia closer together has also shifted greater attention to Central Asia.⁵ When the EU rolled out its new strategy for Central Asia in 2019, it emphasised that the region “has a century-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together” and that Central Asian countries “have renewed this role for the region since attaining independence”.⁶

In this sense, the EU is buying into the changing landscape in a region that binds together Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Asia. In modern times, Central Asia has primarily been considered either a strategic transit hub — for instance, as a base for the United States’ (US) military operations in the Middle East — or, further back in history, as an arena for geopolitical competition between the British and Russian empires. Yet today the region is better understood through an appreciation of its historical role in binding together the East and the West through a web of commercial, political and cultural connections.⁷ As noted by Robert Kaplan, Eurasia is cohering into what is increasingly looking like a “comprehensible unit of trade and conflict”.⁸

⁵ “Connecting Europe & Asia: The EU Strategy”, European Union External Action, Factsheet, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/europe_asia_connectivity_factsheet_1.pdf.

⁶ “EU builds a strong and modern partnership with Central Asia”, European Union External Action, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_centralasia_2019.pdf.

⁷ Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and Future of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 2–3.

⁸ Robert Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo’s World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Random House, 2018), 2.

No experience has been as important in affecting European strategic thinking as the standoff over the international nuclear agreement struck with Iran in 2015. It is also an experience that has accelerated Europe's Eurasian turn through its impact on the transatlantic partnership and the doubling down of the Europe-coordinated multilateral efforts to shield the nuclear agreement from the Trump administration's efforts to torpedo it.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran deal is formally known, was built on an Iranian commitment to scale back its nuclear energy programme to verifiably peaceful levels in exchange for the removal of international sanctions against the country. The product of a lengthy diplomatic effort behind which European leaders were a driving force, the deal was seen by European leaders as a victory for multilateralism, engaged diplomacy and principled dialogue in place of the use of force for managing international crises. Its success and sustenance became a key European foreign policy priority.

Accordingly, the US decision to unilaterally leave the accord was seen as devastating; from a European point of view, the agreement, and its preservation, was always about more than one singular deal. As a former member of the European Parliament, Tarja Cronberg, emphasised following the US decision: "The Iran deal is also about Europe and its role in the world. During negotiations of the Iran deal, Europe achieved a global, long sought role of becoming a major power, negotiating with the world's superpowers. The collapse of the deal threatens the future of nuclear diplomacy and the credibility of European foreign and security policy."⁹

Perhaps it is therefore not surprising that the fallout from the US withdrawal from the JCPOA has affected European strategic thinking profoundly. At first, there was a sense of despair. Leaders of the so-called E3 group of countries that were driving the European effort — France, Germany and the United Kingdom — accepted the US decision with "regret and

⁹ Tarja Cronberg, "Nuclear diplomacy at stake: Can the remaining JCPOA partners join forces to save the deal?", European Leadership Network, 4 July 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nuclear-diplomacy-at-stake-can-the-remaining-jcpoa-partners-join-forces-to-save-the-deal/>.

concern”.¹⁰ More profoundly, there was a sense of vulnerability and the realisation that Europe perhaps has to chart a new strategic course. As Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, noted in a widely quoted passage: “We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands.”¹¹

But perhaps the most consequential repercussion has been a greater sense of realism in European thinking. As Borrell admitted: “We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be.”¹²

In more practical terms, the Iran deal imbroglio has had two discernible effects on European policy. First and most important, it has forced European leaders to re-evaluate the transatlantic partnership. The US is and will remain the most important partner to the EU, but the disagreements between them have exacerbated tensions across the Atlantic — especially as they came at the tail end of a number of other divisive issues.¹³ Second, the efforts to protect the remnants of the Iran deal have compelled European leaders to find a new working relationship on the nuclear issue with Russia and China, the other remaining parties to the agreement. This has been noticeable in the joint efforts and declarations from the Joint Commission of the JCPOA.¹⁴

Iran's Reliance on Europe

Through these developments, Iran has continued to rely heavily on Europe as the driving party to sustain the nuclear agreement. Given the difficulties in maintaining trade with Europe following the US withdrawal from the

¹⁰ Paul Dallison, “Macron, Merkel, May express ‘regret’ at Trump’s Iran move”, Politico.eu, 8 May 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/iran-sanctions-donald-trump-emmanuel-macron-angela-merkel-theresa-may-express-regret-at-trumps-iran-move/>.

¹¹ Giulia Paravicini, “Angela Merkel: Europe must take ‘our fate’ into own hands”, Politico.eu, 28 May 2017,” <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-europe-cdu-must-take-its-fate-into-its-own-hands-elections-2017/>.

¹² Josep Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, Project Syndicate, 8 February 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/embracing-europe-s-power-by-josep-borrell-2020-02>.

¹³ Axel Hellman and Denitsa Raynova, “Transatlantic relations at a new low: What does that mean in practice?” European Leadership Network, 1 June 2018, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/transatlantic-relations-at-a-new-low-what-does-that-mean-in-practice/>.

¹⁴ The Joint Commission is a governing body created under the JCPOA that monitors the implementation of the agreement.

nuclear agreement, Iran's focus initially shifted to other actors, above all China, that were seen as less likely to succumb to US diplomatic and economic pressure to curb trade with Iran. Nonetheless, data quickly indicated a dramatic reduction in Chinese trade with Iran, thereby suggesting that these earlier assumptions were flawed.¹⁵

As a result, Iran looked to the Europeans again. And, here, the key question for the Europeans was how to sustain legitimate economic ties with Iran in spite of far-reaching and stringent American sanctions. The idea of a so-called “special purpose vehicle” for Europe–Iran trade had been floated ever since the US withdrawal, and, at the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, the then EU foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, announced such an initiative. This move was welcomed by the Iranian regime and seemed to signal a first actionable step to sustain the deal.¹⁶

Even as the initiative faltered, leading to increasing tensions between Iranian and European diplomats, the only committed efforts to make any progress came from European capitals. Most notably, French President Emmanuel Macron on several occasions outlined parameters for a revised nuclear agreement. And, as tensions between Washington and Tehran seemed at risk of escalating into armed conflict, the French president reportedly sought to engineer a breakthrough dialogue between presidents Trump and Rouhani at the United Nations in late 2019 but failed at the eleventh hour.¹⁷

New Opportunities for European Diplomacy

Against this backdrop, a key question that arises is how Europe can carve out a more influential role for itself in the future and project the principles and values on which its engagement with the world is based.

¹⁵ “When the sun sets in the East: New Dynamics in China–Iran Trade Under Sanctions”, Bourse and Bazaar, January 2019, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/research-1/2018/1/11/special-report-on-china-iran-trade-under-sanctions>.

¹⁶ “Iran welcomes ‘new European initiatives’ for non-dollar trade”, Reuters, 21 November 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-sanctions-spv/iran-welcomes-new-european-initiatives-for-non-dollar-trade-idUSKCN1NQ1VW>.

¹⁷ Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, “How Iran’s president left Trump hanging, and Macron in the hall”, *The New York Times*, 30 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/middleeast/iran-trump-rouhani-call-macron.html>.

This implies challenges. Can the emerging geopolitical mindset be squared with the EU's more traditional (and arguably more comfortable) role as a "moral" and "regulatory" superpower? And can these ambitions be translated into action? As Carl Bildt, former Swedish prime minister, recently remarked: "A 'geopolitical' commission must demonstrate geopolitical activity."¹⁸ For the EU, that increasingly seems like a fair standard to be held to.

In practical terms, the greatest tests facing European diplomacy will stem from a re-evaluation of the transatlantic partnership. Europe has largely followed the lead of the US on most issues of national security until very recently. The partnership with Washington will remain a key tenet of European security policy, but there is a real possibility that co-ordination will become limited to a narrower set of issues where interests overlap. With further disagreements over how to deal with Iran, the Middle East could be an area where policies diverge further.

In this context, operating with a new Eurasian worldview could be seen as giving Europe more flexibility to advance its security and economic interests. The Eurasian vector offers an opportunity for European leaders to take an active role in an area of emerging economic and strategic importance. As one report notes: "the rapid economic expansion of ... other nearby countries creates an unprecedented opportunity for Central Asia to emerge as an economic trade hub and a transit corridor between Europe and Asia."¹⁹

In important ways, the region is also emerging as a testing ground for multilateralism. The EU's strategy for Central Asia entails seeking a "non-exclusive partnership". As the scholar Fabienne Bossuyt suggests, this allows the EU "to show to the Central Asian leaders that it endorses their preference for multivectoral foreign policies" while stopping short of signalling to

¹⁸ Carl Bildt, "The new 'geopolitical' European Commission faces daunting challenges in 2020", *The Washington Post*, 8 January 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/07/new-geopolitical-european-commission-faces-daunting-challenges-2020/>.

¹⁹ "Investing in Central Asia: One Region, Many Opportunities", BCG.com, December 2018, https://www.bcg.com/Images/BCG-Investing-In-Central-Asia-report-ENG_tcm26-212857.pdf

Moscow and Beijing that it is seeking to increase its footprint in the region at their expense.²⁰

In these dynamics, Iran too plays a role. From a European perspective, the relationship with Iran is primarily driven by security considerations, with the overarching ambition being to maintain stability in the region: Europe's key priorities remain ensuring that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapons programme while holding Tehran to account for its behaviour in the region and dismal human rights record.

From a European perspective, the relationship with Iran is primarily driven by security considerations, with the overarching ambition being to maintain stability in the region.

Yet, through the nuclear deal, Iran has affected European thinking in a much broader sense. In important ways, Iran has been at the centre of the shifting European worldview outlined in this paper. In this sense, Iran is at the heart of Europe's emerging "Eurasian" view as well as central in preparing Europe for acting on it. In what is perhaps a telling feature, it is not the European countries' bilateral relationships with Iran that have been of greatest importance to the Europeans but rather the multilateral efforts they have made to preserve those bilateral relationships.

Conclusion

Europe is waking up to a challenging geopolitical reality, a process that has visibly affected European thinking and is likely to have a discernible effect on the EU's foreign policy and diplomacy. While questions abound over the ability to turn great ambitions into action, there is a profound sense of purpose in European strategic thinking. Several factors have contributed to these developments, including the need to counter a resurgent Russia, the need to deal with an increasingly ambitious China and the need to manage a vital

²⁰ Fabienne Bossuyt, "New EU strategy for Central Asia: All about balance", *The Diplomat*, 2 July 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/new-eu-strategy-for-central-asia-all-about-balance/>.

transatlantic partnership that is suffering from numerous fallouts over divisive policy issues. In important ways, the Iran nuclear deal has crystallised these developments and played a central role in shaping Europe's thinking. The Iran deal has also better prepared Europe for the key challenge of carving out a more influential role for itself and projecting its principles and values.

Meanwhile, new opportunities are opening up for European diplomacy. Strengthening the EU's engagement with Asian countries has emerged as one economic and security priority, and Central Asia is opening up as an important region through which to foster greater connectivity between Europe and Asia. In a broader sense, we might be witnessing an emerging Eurasian context which could give Europe more flexibility to advance its security and economic interests. This Eurasian vector offers an opportunity for European leaders to take an active role in an area of emerging economic and strategic importance while fostering connectivity and strengthening multilateralism.

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Cover Image

Iran's relationships with Europe and Asia are complex and multi-faceted. With Israel, despite overt animosity between them, both countries use parallel approaches to issues. Iran's deepening partnerships with Russia and China as well as renewed ties with the European Union have spurred the Gulf Cooperation Council states to expand their own co-operation with these players.

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