

Partners in Need: Russia and Iran's Strategic Relationship

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Brief Analysis

In April 2001, Brenda Shaffer, research director of Harvard University's Caspian Studies Program and a 2000 visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum to mark the publication of her Policy Paper, [Partners in Need: The Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran. \(templateC04.php?CID=45\)](#) The following is a rapporteur's summary of her remarks.

Russia and Iran see themselves as strategic partners, and therefore their relations are based on an overall security conception. It would be a misperception to assume that because Washington and Moscow share concerns about Islamist radicalism that Russia would necessarily decide to cooperate with the United States on Iran. It would also be a misperception to think that Russia wants to sell arms to Iran solely in order to make money and that the United States can induce Russia not to make these sales by offering a better economic deal.

Strategic Partners Several factors bind Russia and Iran together:

Shared Boundaries. As neighbors, Russia and Iran are forced to interact; they would prefer good relations.

Regional Issues. They each see the other as sharing common interests on some regional issues, like Afghanistan and counternarcotics.

Internal Security. In order for Russia to prevent Muslim mobilization against its role in Chechnya, it needs Iran. At the same time, Iran's domestic security is dependent upon the overall security situation in the region. Only 50 percent of Iran's population is Persian, and most of the country's non-Persian ethnic groups are concentrated in border regions, close to large numbers of their co-ethnics in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Iraq.

Global Strategy. Each state sees itself as an underdog in a unipolar world of U.S. hegemony and each sees the other as an important partner in the process of creating a multipolar international system.

Economics and Arms. This factor is not as important as it might seem. Trade between Russia and Iran, including arms deals, is still low (indeed, lower than it was between the Soviet Union and Iran).

Iranian Ideology and Policies Iran's Islamic ideology and culture have surprisingly little effect on some aspects of government policy, and the Islamic Republic can be remarkably pragmatic when its vital interests are at stake. Iran's approach toward the Caucasus best illustrates the often non-ideological nature of its policies:

In the Nagorno–Karabagh conflict, Iran has (despite its rhetoric of neutrality) cooperated with Christian-majority Armenia in a struggle against Shi'i-majority Azerbaijan. Iran preferred that Azerbaijan remain absorbed in a conflict so that it would be unable to agitate in "South Azerbaijan" — that is, the Iranian region with an Azeri ethnic majority. Ultimately, Iran supported Armenia because its own vital interests could be threatened if a strong Azerbaijani Republic attracted support from the millions of ethnic Azeris living in Iran.

Even though Chechen leaders presented their revolt as a Muslim cause, Iran's comments on the Chechnya conflict were milder than those made by the United States and the Council of Europe. Iranian criticisms were merely rhetorical, and concrete cooperation between Moscow and Tehran was never interrupted by disagreements over Chechnya. Moscow views this cooperation as essential for preventing Muslim backlash against its actions in Chechnya. Taking advantage of this Russian perception, Iranian military delegations visited Russia during the height of the Chechen conflict and secured Russian commitments to supply the Iranians with nuclear reactors and to cooperate on matters of regional security.

Persuading Russia Not to Work with Iran On some issues, it will be extremely difficult to persuade Russia not to work with Iran. For instance, Russia may well think that its conventional arms sales to Iran pose no threat to U.S. security and therefore that U.S. objections to these types of weapons deals should not be taken seriously, especially since the United States sells a significant amount of arms to some of Iran's neighbors. By contrast, Russia is more likely to agree to ban shipments to Iran of items contributing to weapons of mass destruction (WMD). To be sure, even if Russia agreed not to sell WMD technologies to Iran, it is not clear how much effort the Russian government would make to follow through on such a commitment.

To date, the majority of U.S. pressure on Russia to limit ties with Iran has been directed toward the Russian government. Another way to proceed would be to step up the pressure that the U.S. government places on individual Russian companies that cooperate with Iran. While Moscow is interested in its strategic posture and the independence of Russian foreign policy, specific Russian companies and institutions care more about profits. Indeed, the sanctions that have been applied selectively on individual institutions cooperating on missile production and technology have proven effective in pressuring those institutions to change their practices.

The relationship between Russia and Iran could potentially change. Just as ideology, religion, and history did not prevent the two states from cooperating on many fronts, culture and circumstances do not bind them so tightly together that they would be unable to form other tactical alliances. Any improvement in U.S.–Iranian relations could have a dramatic impact on Russian–Iranian cooperation. Despite Russian statements encouraging open dialogue between the United States and Iran, Russians fear that they will lose out if cooperation between Washington and Tehran is renewed. If the United States enters into a deeper dialogue with Iran, it should be careful not to create a zero-sum game vis--vis Russia. Dialogue might begin in areas where all three states' interests are congruent (such as Afghanistan), so as not to alienate Russia.

Iran seems to be hedging its bets in case Russia does decide to cooperate with the United States in nonproliferation efforts. Tehran has tried to maintain a diversity of military suppliers; for instance, during the mid-1990s it sought military technology from China and North Korea. In order to prevent Iranian acquisition of WMD, it may take more than securing Russian cooperation; it may also be necessary to persuade or induce other potential suppliers to forego shipments of destabilizing technologies to Iran.

Despite the Clinton administration's attempts to improve U.S.–Iran relations with the removal of certain sanctions in 1999 and 2000, little has changed in Iran's pursuit of destabilizing technologies. In effect, the Clinton administration extended a hand by lifting these sanctions, and Iran slapped it away. Nor can the United States openly discuss with Iran its concerns about the weapons and technology that Tehran is seeking from Russia. The resumption of normal government-to-government relations between Iran and the United States is blocked by members of the Iranian

power structure who uphold the old-time revolutionary traditions. In this atmosphere of unchanging Iranian policy, allowing the 1996 Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) to lapse (as it is scheduled to do in August, absent congressional action) would be seen by Iran as an indication that the United States is no longer as concerned as it used to be about Iranian proliferation.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman. ❖

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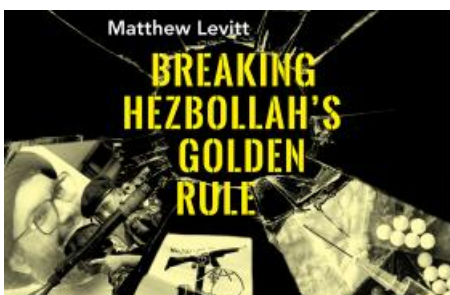
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