



## **Russia and Iran Relationship: Reasons behind Strengthening their Association**

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Russia and Iran have expanded their political and military relations significantly especially after the Syrian crisis reached an impasse. Closer proximity between Russia and Iran has resulted in two major developments of 2013: the agreement on the dismantlement of Chemical Weapons by Syria and the partial breakthrough in the nuclear imbroglio between Iran and the P5+1.

The relationship between Russia and Iran is complicated and complex. During the Soviet Union period, Iran was apprehensive of Russia's imperialistic tendencies over the Persian Gulf and its designs to convert Tehran into a communist country. Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) and Soviet policy during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) of 'strict neutrality' to massive military support for Iraq in the final phase of the war were other issues that made the relationship complex. But national interests and the changing international politics have modified Moscow-Tehran relations which are now on an upward swing.

During 1990's, both Russia and Iran faced isolation from the West. Russia's communist ideology and its 'great power' ambition were not well taken by the West, whereas, the 'Iran hostage crisis' and threat from Iran to the Arab world during the Iran-Iraq War led to its isolation.

For Russia, the seclusion led to a revisionist foreign policy for its 'Near Abroad', Central Asia, Transcaucasia and West Asia, and for that Iran's geostrategic location was crucial. For Iran, although appeasement with Moscow was of 'reluctant willingness', its geostrategic interests in West Asia and Central Asia have led to conciliation with Russia. Tehran purchased weapons from Moscow and also obtained technological support for its nuclear programme. The geopolitical reality in the post Soviet era forced Russia and Iran to find mutually 'reasonable grounds' for cooperation. But a reversal in the relationship also took place.

During the late 1990's and the onset of the 'reset' policy between Russia and the US in 2009 led to a deterioration in their bilateral relationship. The reasons were Russia's refusal to supply the S-300 defence system to Iran, reservation on Tehran's nuclear programme, and an unhealthy competition in the Caspian region and Central Asia for economic and political influence. Since 2012, with the commencement of the Arab Spring and intensification of the Syrian crisis, there is an upward swing in the bilateral relationship.

Russia and Iran are collaborating on key security challenges in Central Asia, Caucasus and Syria. A security pact, which includes the exchange of intelligence on international issues was agreed between the two in 2012. Russia has also reaffirmed its support to Iran's civil nuclear programme. Further, Russia's keenness in strengthening its relationship with Iran is because of factors such as the Islamic extremism and deployment of US' missile defence shield.

The secessionist movements in Chechnya and Dagestan are important national threats for Russia. Chechnya is dominated by Sunnis and Iran supports Moscow's war on Chechens as it believes it is an internal Russian affair. It also supports Moscow's claim that the Chechens are being financed by Saudi Arabia, trained by Pakistan, and backed diplomatically by Turkey and the US. Meanwhile, Dagestan is the gateway to Russia's Caucasus region and Iran shares Caspian Sea maritime boundary with it. Due to high tension with Dagestan, Russia fears that Iran might influence this Muslim dominated republic.

Fears such as the effect of secessionist movements and Islamic extremism in Chechnya, Dagestan, Central Asia, and the security situation in Afghanistan post-2014 have bought Russia

closer to Iran. Iran's close proximity with the Islamic militant political groups-Hezbollah and Hamas, can also help Russia to counter Al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremists.

On Iran's nuclear programme, Russia has been proactive to reach an international deal to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. The objective behind reaching the deal is to prevent the deployment of the US missile defence in Romania and Poland whose borders are close to Russia. Moscow feels its security is being threatened by the missile defence system which is ostensibly being deployed to intercept missiles fired from West Asia and North Africa, especially Iran.

For Iran, Russia is its northern neighbouring country across the Caspian Sea and both have common security, military, political and economic interests. Moscow's success in dismantling of Syrian Chemical Weapons and the partial breakthrough in Iran's nuclear stalemate through its adroit diplomacy has catapulted Russia's image in international affairs. In the evolving world order, Russia is emerging as a counter-weight for Iran against the US' unilateral foreign policy of 'interference' and 'use of force'. Russia's foreign policy of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs and its skilful diplomacy for peaceful resolution of disputes is appreciated by Iran. Its enhanced relationship with Russia also helps Tehran to fight against Salafist terrorism, a sect of Sunni, currently plaguing West Asian countries, including Syria and in expanding its influence in the region.

The potential resumption of Iran's oil exports to global markets and conflict in Central Asia, Caspian Sea and West Asia can be areas of contention between Russia and Iran. But the ramifications of the Arab Spring and the new world order based on multipolarity will help Russia and Iran collaborate on a mutually beneficial relationship based on national interests and security.

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