



## Relations and Cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation: A Game Theory Perspective (An Iranian View)

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### ABSTRACT

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation are imbalanced across various aspects and dimensions, despite their overall progress following a plausible trajectory. Fundamentally, Russia views Iran primarily as an actor that can help counter U.S. unilateralism—particularly given that both nations are subject to sanctions by the United States and Europe—as well as extremist movements in Central Asia, the Northern Caucasus, and Chechnya. However, several barriers hinder the expansion of relations between the two countries. These include Iran's historically negative perception of Russia, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy principle of non-dependence on major powers, limited economic capacities, and subtle competition in energy markets, among other factors. Such constraints have prevented the formation of a strategic alliance between the two nations, despite their close collaboration on specific issues, such as the Syrian crisis. This paper aims to examine the relations and cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation through the lens of game theory. The research follows a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing game theory as a framework for analyzing international relations. Data collection is based on library research and a review of relevant resources on Iran-Russia relations from a game-theoretical perspective. Findings indicate that Iran-Russia relations and cooperation, particularly in areas such as bilateral and periodic defense collaborations and strategic partnerships in regional conflicts, align with cooperative game dynamics. However, at a broader regional level, Russia's strategic approach remains pragmatic and guided by the principle of equilibrium. Despite their mutual cooperation, Iran and Russia are also regional rivals, as evidenced by their differing policies and actions concerning Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Persian Gulf states.

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## 1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a turning point in Iran-Russia relations, which have since experienced numerous fluctuations, shaped by various factors such as their differing positions in the global system, the ideological orientations of their governments, and overlapping yet conflicting interests (Tavakoli & Mahmoodoghli, 2023: 101). These relations remain asymmetrical in different aspects but, overall, follow a plausible trajectory (Monzavi & Hajjizadeh, 2023: 1). The historical trajectory of military and diplomatic confrontations between Iran and Russia before 1953 can be categorized into two phases: one characterized by coercive and adversarial interactions, and the other by more affirmative and cooperative engagements.

Following the Iranian coup d'état in 1953, Iran aligned itself closely with the United States, leading to persistently strained relations with Russia (formerly the Soviet Union). The 1979 Iranian Revolution, however, prompted a shift, as Russia was among the first nations to seek diplomatic engagement with the new Iranian government, given the revolution's explicitly anti-U.S. and anti-Israel stance. This rapprochement, however, was soon challenged by the Iran-Iraq War, as Iraq was a key Soviet ally at the time. After the war, Russia resumed efforts to strengthen ties with Iran, though ideological differences remained a significant obstacle. In the years leading up to the Soviet Union's collapse, Iran-Russia relations were largely confined to diplomatic interactions, constrained by ideological frictions that later evolved into explicit confrontations—a subject explored further in the next section of this study.

In evaluating Iran-Russia relations, the following points warrant consideration:

1. The interests of any two nations do not fully align, though they may share common objectives.
2. The nature of bilateral relations is shaped by the behavior of both states, particularly their political elites, and Iran and Russia can be viewed as strategic allies under specific conditions.
3. The Caspian Sea, as a shared maritime region, plays a critical role in shaping Iran-Russia relations.
4. Russia's historical involvement in Iran's energy sector, particularly its cooperation in nuclear power projects such as the Bushehr Power Plant, significantly influences Iranian perceptions of Russia.
5. The geopolitical orientation of post-Soviet independent republics is crucial, as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan have historically maintained cultural and civilizational ties with Iran.
6. Russia has historically monitored Iran's ideological influence on Islamic resistance groups in the region, a pattern that dates back to Iran's support for Afghan resistance groups during the Soviet-Afghan War and Chechen jihadist movements (Maleki, 2000: 1–13).

The presence of shared threats and the necessity of cooperation in addressing these threats form part of Iran and Russia's mutual strategic calculus. Both countries advocate for a multilateral world order in which the United States does not hold unilateral decision-making power. Consequently, Iran-Russia cooperation is driven not only by shared interests but also by the need to establish a strategic balance against common threats. This collaboration has the potential to contribute to a new regional order in the Middle East, where both nations could assume pivotal roles (Mifakhrayi, 2023: 5; Noory, 2020: 79).

The ongoing confrontation between Russia and the United States over Ukraine has heightened the strategic significance of Iran-Russia defense cooperation (Shirmohammadi, 2024: 269), particularly when examined through the framework of game theory. Game theory, which fundamentally revolves around the rationality of players and their pursuit of self-

interest, employs metaphors, allegories, and modeling to analyze strategic interactions. This theory provides a structured approach for assessing international relations by clarifying the number of actors involved, the strategic choices available to each player, the expected utility of different options, and the distribution of information among participants. In international relations, game theory is widely applied in the study of security dynamics, including alliances, arms races, and arms control, as well as in economic and environmental domains such as trade policy and global warming mitigation efforts (Taherkhani, 2011: 220–222).

This paper aims to conduct an analytical evaluation of Iran-Russia relations by examining Russia—a dominant cross-regional power with significant influence in international affairs—through the lens of game theory. As a former superpower and the leading state of the Eastern Bloc until the late 20th century, Russia remains a key player in global strategic interactions. The relevance of this analysis lies in the centrality of Iran's "Look East" policy, in which strengthening ties with Russia constitutes a major component.

This study builds upon several prior analyses of Iran-Russia relations, each offering valuable insights into different dimensions of their partnership.

To begin with, Tavakoli and Mahmoodoghli (2023), in their article *Threatening Components of Strategic Cooperation between Iran and Russia*, identify key challenges to bilateral cooperation. In particular, they highlight divergent foreign policy perspectives, legal disputes over the Caspian Sea, competition in energy markets, and Russia's complex relations with the U.S. and Israel. Moreover, they emphasize that differing strategic interests regarding the Syrian crisis and its aftermath pose additional threats to sustained Iran-Russia collaboration.

Similarly, Pasandideh (2014), in his paper *Iran-Russia Security Cooperation: Strategies and Opportunities*, examines the geopolitical and security imperatives shaping bilateral relations after the Cold War. He underscores the crucial role of security concerns in fostering cooperation, arguing that both nations can enhance regional stability by coordinating policies to prevent the escalation of political, military, and environmental conflicts. Furthermore, he suggests that mutual engagement in security matters could serve as a buffer against external pressures.

Likewise, Jafari and Zolfaghari (2013), in their study *Iran-Russia Relations: Convergence or Divergence?*, provide a historical analysis of the fluctuating nature of bilateral ties. They contend that shifting geopolitical and geostrategic calculations have periodically transformed the relationship, creating cycles of both confrontation and cooperation. In particular, they argue that geopolitical shifts and evolving national priorities have played a central role in shaping their engagement over time.

Additionally, Khosrow et al. (2018), in *The Impact of Iranian-Russian Military Cooperation on Regional Geopolitical Upheavals*, assess the consequences of Iran-Russia military collaboration. Their findings indicate that, while historical interactions were primarily limited to arms transactions and intelligence-sharing, recent geopolitical developments have necessitated deeper strategic cooperation. In fact, they highlight that both nations have, for the first time, conducted joint military operations in a third-party state. Furthermore, the study argues that Iran's geopolitical priorities and Russia's evolving regional strategy have significantly influenced their military partnership.

Building on this, Abdi et al. (2018), in *A Comparative Study of Strategic Relations Concept in Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation*, explore whether Iran-Russia ties fit within the theoretical framework of strategic relations. They propose that such relations can take multiple forms—including alliances, partnerships, and competitive interactions. More importantly, they argue that Iran and Russia's engagement must be assessed within this broader paradigm to fully capture its complexity.

Finally, Azizi and Hamidfar (2019), in *The Motivations of Iran-Russia Security Cooperation in Central Asia*, examine the underlying drivers of bilateral cooperation in the region following the 9/11 attacks. Their research suggests that shared security concerns at the international level, rather than regional or domestic factors, serve as the primary motivation for collaboration. Although regional dynamics undoubtedly influence bilateral interactions, they argue that the broader international security landscape plays the most decisive role in shaping Iran-Russia engagement in Central Asia. The historical, geopolitical, and strategic complexities of Iran-Russia relations underscore the fluctuating yet significant nature of their partnership. While challenges persist, including ideological differences and competing regional interests, shared threats and mutual strategic objectives continue to drive cooperation. The application of game theory provides a structured analytical framework for understanding these dynamics, offering insights into how both nations navigate their geopolitical and security concerns in an evolving global order.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Social interactions in different communities and international relations have various complexities which cause paramount dependencies among players. In studying how to realize the goals by current players and based on their dependencies, such sciences as mathematic are used to define equations by which one can draw a clear framework by such concepts as rationality and interest orientation. As branch of mathematic, theory of games helps to study players and interactions in different positions to generate a proper conception on others' behaviors. Modeling and metaphor making in in this trend can predict such players' behavior and clarify the analysis of such behavior for observers logically. Considering connoisseurs' opinions in this arena, there is a certain framework in this model for evaluation and practice which includes recognizing the number of players, their nature, player's initiatives, and expected desirability for each player (Taherkhani, 2011: 220 – 222). In turn, if one intends to evaluate existing components in this framework by the view of importance and priority, players would act as the main components of such processes and other components are defined and illuminated by their relations to main ones. In fact, in games model, we are facing with the nature, role, behavior and desirability and decisions of players. Among above components, players' behaviors which is emanated from their decisions is an important factor since behavior by each player impacts on the behavior of other ones. Such impact can be either positive or negative. Dependency of players' behavioral impact on each other causes that resulted conditions are called as strategic conditions since it causes that each player should pay an accurate attention to others' behavior in order to decide on his/her choices. A main hypothesis in theory of games is *minimax* principle. It means that any player looks for increasing the minimum score which is sure he/she can achieve it while he/she looks for decreasing the maximum lost whose endurance in unavoidable. Any game has its own pillars by which it is recognized. In fact, pillars of the game would form its conditions, method and result.

### 2.1. Pillars of theory of games

- 2.1.1. players: any game can be played by two or more players who interact each other under certain circumstances.
- 2.1.2. initiatives: a set of action taken by any player under certain circumstances of the game.
- 2.1.3. preferences: it suggests that what is important for each player and what is preferred to other ones (Kalantar et al., 2018: 81 – 82). Usually, players' preferences are based on rationality (Salvatore, 2009: 150 – 151). In addition to abovementioned pillars, there are other elements in theory of games. We can classify them as below:

## 2.2. Elements of theory of games

- 2.2.2.1. Strategy: it is the full map which refers to movements already determined and supplement the game in a manner that aside from rival's action, at least a minimum result is ensured. Each person's strategy considered other rivals' potential behavior and neutralize rivals' expectations on his/her behavior. In theory of games, it is assumed that in a certain situation. The domain of each player's strategies is not unlimited and such strategies are known by other players.
- 2.2.2. Payment: the value of the game for two players in the location of their strategy coincidence is the concept of payment. This value is achieved whenever a player executes his/her own strategy. Overall, payment is the value of the game at the end of the game estimated by probabilities and positive/negative progress toward goals and game rules for each paired strategy.
- 2.2.3. Rules: there are known rules in games which govern the game. These rules are all recipes which determine allowed and disallowed initiatives. In fact, rules are constraints by which any game is executed.
- 2.2.4. Information: this is another radical element of theory of games and is based on the assumption that any game has an information structure considered in game rules.
- 2.2.5. Alliances: in multiplayer games, alliances are too important. Two or more players may act in a joint format so achieve more scores. The members of an alliance share in the achieved value. However, their shares may or may not be equal (Dinparast and Ramazani, 2018: 173 – 174). Formation of alliances is the result of competitive bargaining. Theory of games frameworks actions and reaction depended to each other, that is, when two or more players' actions (collective actors like unities or international organizations) yield to joint clear results. These actors' choices are influenced by the environment in which they find themselves and it finally includes the nature of players' mutual relations. In turn. One can say that the type of the game played by these players would form the structure of their motivation (Kalantar et al., 2018: 81 – 82).

## 3. Defensive relations between Islamic Republic of Iran and Russian Federation

In an international system that lacks a legal hierarchy and legitimate entities to ensure global security—one characterized by a form of anarchy, as viewed by pragmatists—states are compelled to prioritize the enhancement of their military capabilities. Given that national security cannot be easily entrusted to external actors, governments typically adopt a self-reliant defense policy. In this context, acquiring military technology and weaponry from available sources becomes essential for deterring adversaries and containing threats in the event of war. However, since no country can independently address all security threats, states often seek defensive alliances and strategic alignments that lead to formal security pacts. As a result, strategic partnerships play a crucial role in shaping foreign relations, particularly in meeting security needs. In fact, a strategic partnership represents the highest level of security and defense cooperation between two or more nations. The support provided by allies can encompass a broad range of military and defense-related services, including arms transfers, military technology exchange, training programs, advisory assistance, and even joint military operations against common threats.

An analysis of Iran-Russia defense relations, based on the theory of games and the framework of their bilateral agreements, underscores the structured nature of their strategic engagement. Since 2002, both countries have formalized their cooperation through a 10-year defense agreement, which was subsequently renewed for another decade and later extended for an additional five years until 2027. This agreement represents the foundation of their strategic partnership. However, Russia perceives the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional

ally with only periodic strategic significance. Notably, prior to the conflict in Ukraine, Russia viewed the United States and the broader West as rivals rather than outright adversaries—a stance that contrasts sharply with Iran’s fundamentally adversarial perception of the U.S. and Western powers.

#### **4. The most important factors and thematic fields in Iran – Russia relations**

Principally, affecting thematic factors and fields on relations and cooperation between Islamic Republic of Iran and Russian Federation in different sectors are multiple and multilateral. To elucidate and clarify these factors, this study will describe them separately.

##### **4.1. Anti – hegemonic system in international regime level**

In many international arenas, Iran and Russia share similar perspectives. Both countries oppose U.S. unilateralism and view its efforts to establish a unipolar world order as a threat to their interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia have both faced what they perceive as Western double standards on human rights and democracy. In various declarations, they have criticized these discriminatory approaches. Their shared stance on human rights has led them to support each other’s positions. Since 1996, Russia has consistently voted against United Nations resolutions condemning Iran’s human rights record, while Tehran has reciprocated by backing Russia’s positions. Iran and Russia also maintain close cooperation within the United Nations, engaging in continuous lobbying on key international issues and jointly opposing any weakening of the UN’s role in resolving global crises.

Despite signing numerous agreements with other nations, Russia has been unable to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) due to U.S. opposition, while smaller countries like Kyrgyzstan and Georgia have secured membership. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly criticized the U.S. for using the WTO to further its political objectives. Similarly, Iran has been unable to join the WTO due to political challenges. As neighboring countries to Afghanistan, the world’s primary hub for illicit drug production and trafficking, Iran and Russia face a shared security threat. In response, they have developed strong bilateral and international cooperation to combat drug smuggling and related issues.

##### **4.2. Regional problems**

Russia’s geographical positioning renders it highly vulnerable along its southern borders, particularly in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the Caucasus. The strategic sensitivity Moscow attributes to upheavals in these three regions underscores their significance in Russian foreign policy. Experts argue that geopolitical dynamics in these areas are crucial supplements to Russia’s broader geopolitical strategy; any instability in these regions could seriously endanger Russia’s position. Consequently, a fundamental objective of Moscow’s foreign policy doctrine is to establish a buffer zone of peaceful coexistence along its borders. This involves actively mitigating sources of tension and preventing the emergence of conflicts in neighboring regions.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the only country that shares borders with all three regions, making it a key player in Russia’s foreign policy considerations. Iran’s geographical position offers a vital advantage: it provides Central Asia with a strategic exit from its geopolitical deadlock. Additionally, Iran and Russia are the only littoral states of the Caspian Sea that, apart from their presence in this basin, also enjoy direct access to international waters. In the Caucasus, Iran shares borders with two conflict-prone republics—Armenia and Azerbaijan—further increasing its strategic relevance. Moreover, Iran’s historical and cultural ties with nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus enhance its influence in these regions. These factors contribute to Russia’s keen interest in Iran’s policies and actions within these areas.

One notable instance of conflicting Iranian-Russian interests was the civil war in Tajikistan, where Tehran backed Islamist factions while Moscow supported the central government. Despite these divergent interests, both countries eventually resolved their differences through multiple rounds of negotiations in Tehran and Moscow. The Tajikistan crisis provided a valuable lesson for both nations on the importance of regional cooperation. Similarly, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan strengthened Iran-Russia collaboration, as both countries shared concerns about regional instability and sought to curb emerging threats.

The Caspian Sea represents another domain of Iranian-Russian cooperation. This body of water possesses unique economic, geopolitical, and environmental significance. A lack of coordination among coastal states could transform the Caspian Sea from a zone of opportunity into a source of regional tension. Ongoing negotiations regarding the legal status of the Caspian Sea have experienced numerous fluctuations over the years. However, despite their differences, Iranian and Russian positions on the issue have increasingly converged, with Moscow recognizing the strategic importance of Tehran's cooperation in resolving these disputes.

At a broader regional level, Iran and Russia have potential for cooperation in the Persian Gulf and West Asia. Russia has traditionally sought a more active role in the Persian Gulf's geopolitical landscape, and recent developments have created new opportunities for collaboration between Moscow and Tehran. Two key factors contribute to this dynamic. First, Iran's regional influence has grown due to shifts in power dynamics, such as the emergence of a Shiite-led government in Iraq and the electoral victory of Hamas in Palestine, both of which align with Tehran's strategic interests. Second, Russia has intensified its involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, as evidenced by its support for Hamas despite pressure from the West.

Understanding the geopolitical significance of West Asia and the Persian Gulf in global energy security helps contextualize Iran-Russia cooperation. The United States has formulated and implemented new strategic policies aimed at maintaining its dominance in the region, exemplified by the so-called "Greater West Asia Plan." Against this backdrop, Iranian-Russian cooperation becomes even more critical.

One of the most significant factors driving Iranian-Russian collaboration is their shared opposition to the presence and influence of regional and extra-regional actors—including Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. A key objective of their political and security strategy is to counter the penetration of the U.S., Turkey, and Israel into their overlapping spheres of influence (Cheshmeh Alavi, 2005: 195). In Central Asia and the Caucasus, both countries share similar strategic interests and remain dissatisfied with the increasing presence of external powers, including the U.S., Turkey, and Israel (Sanayi, 2008: 321). These regions serve as vital security buffers for both nations (Movahedi, 2006: 91; Rezazadeh, 2005: 85). Over time, Iran and Russia have developed a common understanding of their strategic interests in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, and the Caucasus, providing a solid foundation for their regional cooperation. The perceived threat of expanding Western influence—particularly through Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan—has further reinforced this alignment (Karami, 2010: 120). Iran and Russia have also repeatedly expressed their opposition to the growing presence of external actors in the Caspian Sea, viewing this as a direct challenge to their regional security (Koolayi, 1999: 306). Consequently, this shared security concern has strengthened Iranian-Russian convergence, directly impacting Tehran's national security strategy.

Another key aspect of Iranian-Russian collaboration has been their coordinated efforts in Syria. This partnership has played a decisive role in shaping regional power dynamics. Both nations, driven by historical, geopolitical, and security considerations, oppose external political, military, and economic interference in their surrounding regions. Syria holds a

particularly strategic position for both countries, enabling them to exert influence over broader regional conflicts, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Their shared opposition to Western intervention, military cooperation, economic ties, and concerns over the rise of pro-Western or Salafi movements have fostered close alignment on the Syrian crisis. The two nations have actively worked together to maintain regional stability and security while pursuing diplomatic initiatives to resolve conflicts.

Iran-Russia consultations and lobbying efforts on regional issues have further solidified their cooperation (Sharaf Alzyad, 2008: 2002). Their proactive engagement in conflict resolution has created significant opportunities for sustained collaboration (Koolayi, 1999: 207). For example, their joint efforts to maintain political stability and security in Central Asia have fostered mutual trust (Koolayi, 2000: 281). Iran's successful mediation in Tajikistan's internal conflicts enhanced its regional standing and reaffirmed Russia's recognition of Iran's constructive role (Karami, 2002: 108). Perhaps the most evident manifestation of their security cooperation was their joint military support for the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan against the Taliban (Karami, 2010: 119).

Russia's growing proximity to Iran is also linked to its broader ambitions in West Asia and the Persian Gulf. Moscow has long sought an active presence in this region, which remains a foreign policy priority due to its ongoing strategic volatility. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia aimed to recalibrate its regional policies by engaging not only with Iran but also with Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This interest stems from the Persian Gulf's vast energy resources and its strategic importance in global geopolitics.

## **5. Iran – Russia cooperation and relations by theory of games**

According to above points, Iran – Russia cooperative and relations have been a type of collaborative game. Their collaborative games have been more visible than other fields. Defensive relations in weaponry sector bilaterally and cooperation in such fields as curbing traditional extremism and terrorism (strategic contribution).

### **5.1. Weaponry cooperation**

In light of Russia's new Eurasian approach in its foreign policy, relations between Russia and Iran have been steadily expanding since the mid-1990s. Their cooperation is primarily focused on the political-security and military sectors. After India and China, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the third-largest importer of Russian weaponry and military systems—a trend that began before the collapse of the Soviet Union and has continued ever since. A significant number of Russian military advisors are present in Iran, and Iranian military students and personnel receive training in Russia as part of their defense cooperation framework. This collaboration is critical across various military sectors and has gained even more attention amid growing U.S. pressure. The Iran-Russia partnership serves as a response to U.S.-Turkey military cooperation and reflects a revival of Cold War-era dynamics. Increasing regional competition in the Caspian Sea and surrounding areas has further underscored the importance of this military alliance.

Despite Russia's special relationship with Israel, Moscow has remained independent in shaping its policies toward Iran. The 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement, which sought to limit the transfer of military systems and weaponry to Iran, failed to hinder the development of Iran-Russia relations. President Vladimir Putin later canceled the agreement, paving the way for expanded military cooperation. While Russia viewed the agreement as primarily concerning nuclear missile technology, the United States interpreted it as covering all advanced weaponry, aiming to prevent Iran from modernizing its military capabilities. For Russian leaders, arms deals with Iran hold significant economic and political value that cannot be overlooked. Moscow sees military and defense cooperation with Iran not only as a



means of strengthening bilateral ties but also as a strategic tool for managing its relationship with the United States. Additionally, this policy has played a crucial role in Russia's broader regional strategy. Iran has been a lucrative market for Russian military-industrial products, despite ongoing criticism from pro-Western figures in Russia, particularly regarding nuclear cooperation with Tehran (Koolayi, 2008: 218–219).

### **5.2. Strategic partnership paradigm in regional issues**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a regional power, while the Russian Federation holds international influence. As a result, Iran-Russia relations differ at the bilateral, regional, and international levels, with their strategic partnership being primarily limited to the regional level (Karami, 2016: 29). This is because their shared interests, actions, and interactions are largely regional in scope. However, it is important to note that while Iran and Russia's strategic partnership is regional, its outcomes can have significant international consequences.

The concept of "strategic" in the Iran-Russia partnership refers to the formation of joint strategic actions, such as their collaboration in the Syrian crisis, which could potentially extend into other strategic domains, including Eurasian geopolitics, transit routes, and economic cooperation. Two key factors in this partnership are its "unofficial nature" and the "reduction of commitment costs," which may be even more critical than the partnership itself.

A major point of contention in this relationship is Israel. Historically, Israel has not been considered a strategic partner for Russia (Razoux, 2008: 2). However, Moscow regards Israel as strategically valuable due to the presence of over one million Russian-speaking Jews in the country and Israel's role in the triangular relationship between Russia, the United States, and Israel. In this context, Russia's cooperation with Iran in Syria has been shaped by its broader security calculations.

Conversely, Iran's primary objective in Syria is to uphold the Axis of Resistance as a means of countering Israel and ensuring its own security. Consequently, Israel serves as a crucial intersection point between Iranian and Russian strategic interests. Strengthening the practical aspects of their partnership could help mitigate these tensions, but achieving this balance requires a nuanced and strategic approach. A similar logic could also apply to Saudi Arabia, considering its geopolitical significance.

### **5.3. Russia's macro and pragmatic game in West Asia and Iran's status**

Russia seeks to maintain equilibrium in West Asia. Since coming to power, President Vladimir Putin has established a foreign policy framework based on strategic balance—avoiding strict neutrality while also refraining from fully siding with any party in conflicts or competitions. Instead, Russia engages with all sides to maximize its benefits. Within this strategy, the Islamic Republic of Iran plays a crucial role in Russia's West Asia policy.

Moscow views cooperation with Iran as a means to counter U.S. influence in the region. It recognizes Iran's ability to contribute to regional security in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Additionally, economic considerations factor into Russia's decision to sustain Iran as a market for its defense industry. Selling weapons to Iran is not just a commercial strategy; it is also a geopolitical tool to prevent Western penetration into Iran. Moscow fears that if it does not supply arms to Tehran, Iran will turn to its rivals. Therefore, arms sales serve as a mechanism to maintain influence over Iran, a strategy Russia considers relatively successful.

Despite these ties, Russia does not perceive Iran as a potential enemy. On the contrary, Iran is a valuable customer for Russian military hardware, an important geopolitical partner, and an emerging regional power that has helped balance U.S. political and military influence in the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and West Asia. Moreover, Iran has played a role in curbing Sunni extremism in the northern Caucasus and Central Asia.

At the same time, Russia views Iran as a dominant regional power in its neighborhood, with the ability to project influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Moscow's motivations for maintaining strong ties with Iran include securing an ally against the United States, countering Western sanctions, and managing threats from Sunni extremism and separatism. However, Russia also actively engages with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel.

Moscow's cooperation with Saudi Arabia is crucial for maintaining high energy prices, which are vital for Russia's economy. Russian engagement with Gulf Arab states is also strategically important, as Moscow seeks to prevent conflicts between its regional partners—particularly between Iran, Sunni states, and Israel. Any regional conflict could create an opportunity for the U.S. to push Russia to the sidelines. Additionally, Russia sees Gulf investment and trade as key to mitigating the impact of Western sanctions.

High energy prices benefit Russia economically while also serving as a pressure tool against Europe. As part of its balancing act, Moscow maintains relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the long-term risk of this approach is that both countries may eventually distrust Russia. Putin's strategy relies on the fear that if either Iran or Saudi Arabia distances itself from Moscow, the other will gain an advantage. Consequently, both nations are incentivized to maintain strong ties with Russia.

Should Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel shift from proxy competition to direct conflict, Russia would be forced to choose a side. Aligning with Iran could cost Moscow its relationships with Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and their regional allies. Conversely, siding with Saudi Arabia could damage Russia's ties with Iran and other states that Moscow views as potential alternatives to the U.S. To avoid such a scenario, Russia aims to keep tensions between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel at a manageable level.

This balancing strategy was evident in Syria. When Israeli attacks on Iranian positions in Syria escalated, increasing the risk of direct conflict, Russia intervened by providing Syria with the S-300 missile system to limit Israeli strikes. However, Moscow also permitted Israel to conduct limited, controlled attacks on Iranian positions, demonstrating its commitment to maintaining equilibrium.

Historically, Russia's regional influence was limited to protecting its allies. During the Cold War, Moscow offered little support to Arab states against Israel. In 2003 and 2011, it remained a passive observer as U.S.-led interventions overthrew Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi—both leaders who had maintained friendly ties with Russia. However, in Syria, Russia demonstrated both military strength and political will by ensuring Bashar al-Assad's survival.

Some analysts argue that Russia has surpassed the U.S. as the dominant power in the region or, at the very least, established itself as an indispensable player. While Russia lacks soft power advantages such as cultural ties and historical relationships, regional disillusionment with Western interventions has bolstered Moscow's standing. U.S. failures in Iraq and Syria have damaged its reputation, allowing Russia to capitalize on the resulting power vacuum.

Russia's growing influence in West Asia is, in part, a reflection of U.S. weakness. However, despite its relative success, Moscow faces the ongoing challenge of maintaining balanced relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. A particular concern for Iran is Russia's gradual tilt toward Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Although the Syrian conflict positioned Iran and Russia as close allies, energy politics have strengthened ties between Moscow and Riyadh. In 2016, Russia and Saudi Arabia reached an oil production agreement, marking the beginning of deeper cooperation in energy markets. Since then, Saudi Arabia has used oil as leverage to disrupt Tehran-Moscow cooperation. The

emergence of shale oil has further driven Saudi-Russian alignment, creating shared economic interests.

Meanwhile, U.S. policy in West Asia—specifically its gradual withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan—has created a vacuum that Russia seeks to fill. Saudi Arabia, in turn, is eager to present itself as a more reliable partner for Moscow than Iran. As part of its Vision 2030 initiative, Saudi Arabia aims to diversify its economy and military capabilities. Given ongoing tensions between Russia and the U.S., Riyadh is attempting to balance its ties with Washington while leveraging Russia as a counterweight.

A key test for Russia-Iran relations could emerge in post-ISIS Syria. Disagreements over Assad's political future and the distribution of reconstruction contracts may influence Moscow's strategic choices. If tensions arise, Russia may reassess its balancing act, leading to potential shifts in its regional alliances (Asgarian, 2019: 67–70).

## **6. Conclusion**

With the territorial expansion of Tsarist Russia in the eighteenth century, the two countries became neighbors. Since then, and especially after the October 1917 Revolution, Russia, alongside Britain, was one of the main external actors influencing Iranian affairs. Many of Iran's domestic upheavals were shaped by their interventions and presence. During the Soviet era, Iran-Russia relations were influenced by the broader geopolitical competition between the Soviet Union and Western countries. However, following the Islamic Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union, their relationship entered a new phase, marked by a shift in its geopolitical logic.

Addressing the main research question—how can Iran-Russia relations and cooperation be analyzed through game theory?—one can argue that their interactions largely follow a collaborative game model. While Russia's overarching strategic approach in West Asia is highly pragmatic, one key aspect of its bilateral relationship with Iran has been a defensive partnership that emerged after the Soviet collapse. The two countries engage in extensive arms exchanges, and their cooperation extends beyond military transactions to include nuclear collaboration and counterterrorism efforts.

At the regional level, Iran-Russia cooperation has produced significant geopolitical outcomes. After the Soviet collapse, Russia demonstrated its commitment to countering U.S. efforts to shape the regional balance of power. This was most evident in 2015 when Russia decisively entered the Syrian crisis. More broadly, Iran-Russia collaboration has focused on countering both fundamentalism and the influence of external powers, particularly the United States, in regions such as Central Asia and West Asia. In this context, Russia's support for Iran's membership in multilateral organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and the Eurasian Economic Union reflects their shared strategic interests.

Through the lens of game theory, Iran-Russia relations can be understood as a collaborative game. However, it is important to recognize that such cooperation should not be taken for granted, given Russia's broader strategic goal of maintaining equilibrium in West Asia. Moscow's approach to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Persian Gulf states demonstrates its commitment to balancing relations rather than aligning fully with any one actor. Additionally, Israel's role in shaping Iran-Russia relations, as well as the fluctuations in its ties with Moscow, must be considered in analyzing the dynamics of this strategic game.

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