



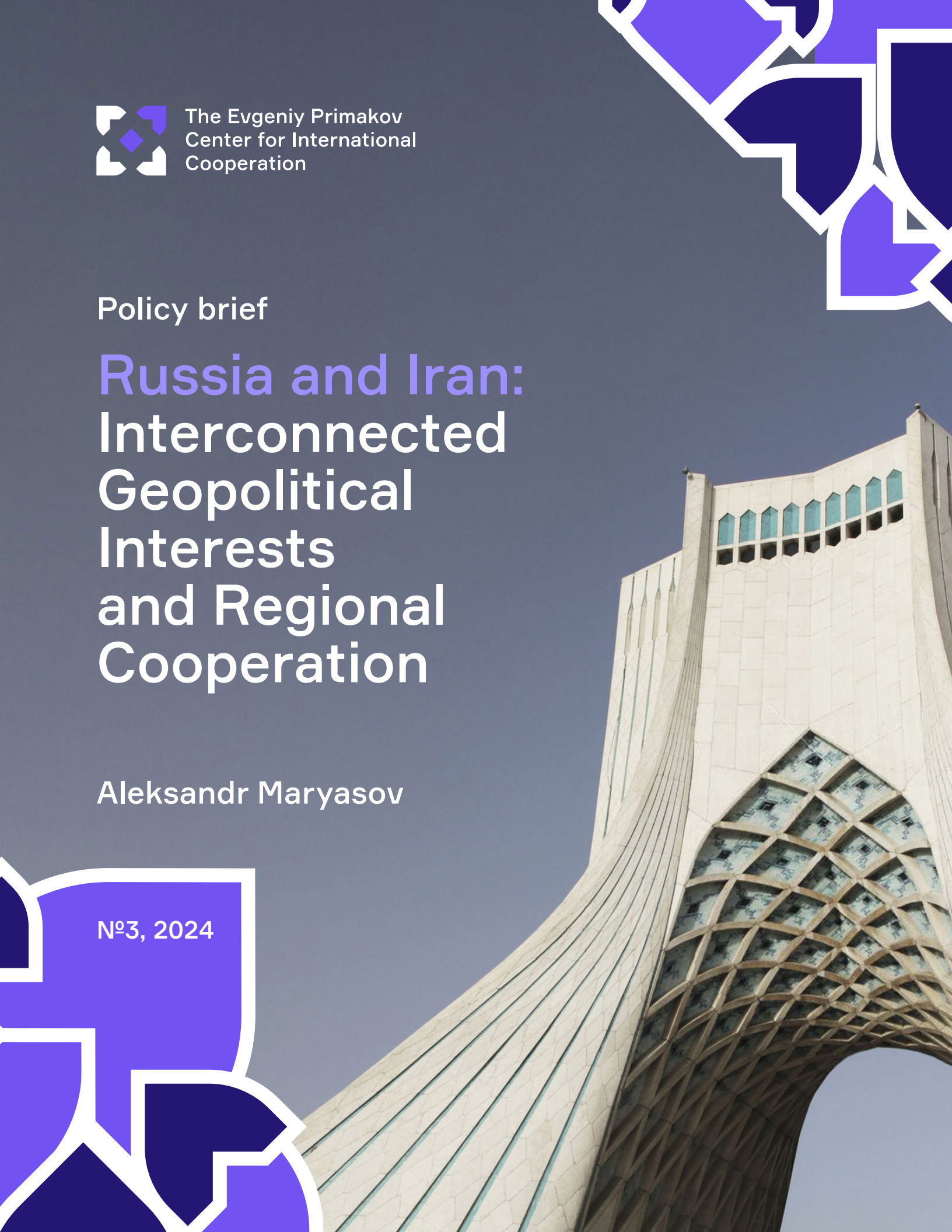
The Evgeniy Primakov  
Center for International  
Cooperation

Policy brief

# Russia and Iran: Interconnected Geopolitical Interests and Regional Cooperation

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## **The Evgeniy Primakov Center for International Cooperation**

### **Policy brief**

### **Russia and Iran: Interconnected Geopolitical Interests and Regional Cooperation**

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# Summary

- With increasing sanctions and military pressure from the West, along with efforts to isolate Russia and Iran globally, the national interests of Moscow and Tehran have become more closely aligned. Both countries are working together to push back against sanctions and political pressure, while expanding their trade, economic and defense cooperation. This has set the stage for a growing strategic partnership. A new Agreement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and Iran, expected to be signed by the end of 2024, will provide a legal foundation for this new level of cooperation.
- Russia and Iran are working closely on security along their borders and in the neighboring regions, aiming to counter the threats of international terrorism and foreign military interference.
- Iran's nuclear program continues to play a major role in shaping the Middle East. The US decision to unilaterally exit the nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018 sparked new tensions, putting the region on the edge of a major conflict. Moscow and Tehran are both deeply worried about the ongoing armed conflict between Israel and Palestine, which could escalate into a direct military confrontation between Iran and Israel if the current dynamics persist.
- Russia and Iran's joint proposals for collective security in the Persian Gulf show that they see eye to eye on many regional issues. However, until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved and the Iranian nuclear issue is addressed, it's unlikely these proposals can move forward at the regional level.
- Despite Western sanctions, trade and economic ties between Russia and Iran are still growing in a number of key sectors like nuclear and thermal energy, engineering, rail transport, oil and gas, and agriculture.
- With Western markets cut off for Moscow and supply chains to Europe disrupted, Iran's role as a major transport hub has become more critical for Russia, especially within the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).
- The tragic death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a plane crash and the election of reformist Masoud Pezeshkian as his successor won't alter the course of Russian-Iranian relations. Strengthening ties with Russia remains a top foreign policy priority for Iran, a stance fully backed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

# 1. The Rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran: Foreign Policy Factors

The coup d'état in Kiev in February 2014, followed by Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, on the one hand, and the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal (JCPOA), which led to increased American sanctions on Iran, on the other hand, have significantly shifted the global geopolitical landscape. These events have created favorable conditions for Russia and Iran to draw closer.

◆ **With sanctions mounting and both countries facing intense pressure from the West, including efforts to isolate them on the global stage, Russia and Iran have found themselves “in the same boat”.**

Both countries have been slapped with an unprecedented number of sanctions. Iran has been under US economic sanctions since 1980, after the fall of the pro-US Shah's government and the prolonged hostage crisis. For Russia, the sanctions regime began in 2014, after Crimea was integrated into the Russian Federation, and escalated dramatically with the start of the special military operation in Ukraine in 2022. Russia now faces three times the number of sanctions imposed on Iran<sup>1</sup>.

Despite these challenges, both countries are successfully pushing back against attempts by the US and its allies to isolate them. They continue to build relationships with friendly nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Russian-Iranian cooperation is also growing within international organizations beyond Western influence, particularly in the SCO and BRICS, which Iran recently joined with Russia's backing. Additionally, Iran has signed a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and applied for observer status. Participation in the work of these international institutions allows Tehran to diversify its foreign relations and ease the sanctions pressure to address economic growth issues at home<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Russia Faced 3 Times More Sanctions Than Iran Over 40 Years. RIA Novosti, February 22, 2024.- <https://ria.ru/amp/20240222/sanktsii-1928870408.html>

2 Iran's Trajectory: SCO and BRICS First, Then EAEU. Eurasian business association. June 21, 2023.- <https://www.eaab.ru/tpost/01ciua39j1-traektoriya-irana-sperva-shos-i-bricks-po>

- ◆ **The US and its allies are ramping up their pressure on Russia and Iran through military means. In Europe, Washington uses the Kiev regime against Russia, while pitting Israel against Iran in the Middle East.**

Iran understands the rationale behind the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. During a meeting with President Putin in Tehran on July 19, 2022, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that NATO would have triggered a war over Crimea if Russia hadn't launched its preemptive military operation<sup>3</sup>.

- ◆ **Together, Russia and Iran are countering the aggressive military and political ambitions pursued by the US in Europe and the Middle East, coordinating their efforts to resist Western sanctions, and expanding their trade, economic and defense cooperation. This growing alignment has led to the formation of a strategic partnership, cemented by a comprehensive partnership agreement endorsed in July 2024<sup>4</sup>.**

The signing of this agreement has bolstered Iran's standing as an influential regional player, while Russia has gained a strong ally in the Middle East.

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<sup>3</sup> Khamenei: NATO Would Be at War With Russia Over Crimea Had It Not Brought Troops to Ukraine. Kommersant, July 19, 2022. - <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5470208>

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Ministry Announced a Historical Treaty With Iran. RBC. July 23, 2024. - <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/07/2024/669f56529a7947269f5fbc06>

## 2. Regional Security and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Issues

◆ **Russia and Iran have been working closely to ensure stability and security in the region.**

Their joint mediation played a crucial role in ending the civil war in Tajikistan between the government and the opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, stabilizing the situation in immediate proximity to their borders. It should be noted that things were rather precarious at the time, especially with the Taliban taking control in neighboring Afghanistan, which has sparked fears of radical elements spreading beyond the country. Moscow and Tehran's diplomatic efforts also led to the start of UN-backed talks in 1994, culminating in a peace agreement for Tajikistan in 1997<sup>5</sup>.

When the Syrian crisis erupted in 2011 and terrorist groups, backed by external forces, sought with intensified persistence to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad, an ally to both Russia and Iran, Moscow and Tehran coordinated several military and political steps to counter the terrorist threat and maintain Syria's territorial integrity. Iran increased its military support to Assad's government and the Hezbollah units that were backing it, while expanding its military presence in Syria. And Russia secured its military presence in that country by stationing an air force formation at an airbase in Khmeimim and setting up a naval facility in Tartus. The two nations also contributed significantly to resolving the Syrian conflict by launching the Astana format peace talks. This peace process has resulted in a few important agreements<sup>6</sup>.

Russia and Iran have worked together on security issues in the Caspian Sea border regions and the South Caucasus.

◆ **It was on the initiative coming from both countries that the Caspian nations committed to prevent foreign military presence in the region or other nations' military bases in their respective territories<sup>7</sup>.**

<sup>5</sup> Toshmammadov M. Civil War in Tajikistan and PostConflict Rehabilitation. Sapporo: Hokkaido University, Center of Slavic Researches, 2004. [https://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/pdf\\_seminar/040607tasmammadov\\_eng.pdf](https://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/pdf_seminar/040607tasmammadov_eng.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Kortunov A., Khlebnikov A., Sanai M., Russian and Iran in Syria and Beyond: Upcoming Challenges. RIAC 2020. <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-Iran-Syria-Paper59.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. President of Russia, August 12, 2018. - <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5328>

However, the cooperation between Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus is complicated by the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as US and EU attempts to extend their political and military influence to Yerevan and Baku. Moscow and Tehran have repeatedly voiced concerns about potential consequences of the growing and deepening ties between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel, and are taking steps to counter the negative consequences of Western influence in the region aiming to provide security and safeguard their national interests<sup>8</sup>.

The situation in Afghanistan has also become increasingly important for Russian-Iranian regional cooperation. Both countries maintain diplomatic ties with the Kabul government. The US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan and the stabilization of the domestic situation, along with Kabul's desire to develop trade with neighboring countries and the Taliban's commitment to fight ISIS and drug trafficking, have raised the question of removing the Taliban from the list of terrorist organizations and fostering closer ties with the movement<sup>9</sup>.

◆ **Iran's nuclear program remains a key factor in shaping the situation in the Middle East.**

Russia played a constructive role in finalizing the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), working with Iran and other parties to find mutually acceptable solutions. Iran agreed to sign this compromise deal, which temporarily limited its nuclear activities, hoping for the removal of the UN Security Council sanctions and international recognition of its right to peaceful nuclear development. The JCPOA effectively blocked the path to militarizing Iran's nuclear program and was a significant step toward strengthening nuclear non-proliferation and stabilizing the region.

However, the US unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the resulting increase in sanctions pressure against Tehran derailed the nuclear deal. While Iran did not fully abandon the JCPOA, it stopped complying with the restrictions on its nuclear program and scaled back its cooperation with the IAEA on nuclear monitoring<sup>10</sup>.

◆ **So far, sporadic indirect contacts between the US and Iran have failed to revive the nuclear deal, contributing to ongoing tensions in the region, especially with the persistent armed conflict between Palestine and Israel and the worsening Iran–Israel relations.**

<sup>8</sup> South Caucasus: Interests of Russia and Iran. Russia Today. January 24, 2023. - <https://pressria.ru/20230124/953988678.html>

<sup>9</sup> FCSM Withdrew License from Glenik Brokering House. BFM RU, May 21, 2010. - <https://www.bfm.ru/amp/news/55128>

<sup>10</sup> Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Kommersant. July 14, 2015. - <https://www.kommersant.ru/amp/2768104>

# 3. Russia–Iran Interaction in the Middle East

Like Russia, Iran strongly condemns Israel’s large-scale invasion of the Gaza Strip. However, while Moscow advocates for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through diplomatic means, Iran supports the idea of liberating Palestinian lands by force. To that end, Tehran coordinates the activities of pro-Iranian groups and organizations that make up its regional “Axis of Resistance”<sup>11</sup>.

Both Russia and Iran have called for the establishment of a Palestinian state. However, Moscow envisions a two-state solution, with both Israel and Palestine coexisting as independent nations. Tehran, on the other hand, does not recognize Israel’s right to exist as a state<sup>12</sup>.

In April 2024, amid escalating violence in Gaza, Tel Aviv triggered an exchange of missile strikes and drone attacks with Iran, bringing both countries dangerously close to a direct military confrontation. Iranian officials have stated that Israel’s actions threaten Iran’s national security, particularly warning that attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities could prompt Tehran to reconsider its decision not to pursue nuclear weapons<sup>13</sup>. This development runs counter to Russia’s interests in maintaining the non-proliferation regime in the region, so Moscow has been taking steps to stabilize the situation in the Middle East.

◆ **Russia and Iran have each developed and proposed their own concept for a collective security system in the Persian Gulf, sharing similar views on many issues.**

Both countries agree that adherence to international law, the principles of the UN Charter and UN Security Council resolutions is key to providing security in the region. Russia’s approach emphasizes a multilateral, comprehensive and gradual, stepwise process toward building a regional security framework<sup>14</sup>. Iran’s Hormuz Peace Initiative highlights respect for national sovereignty, ter-

11 Army: the Only Solution to Palestinian Issue Is to Fight to Completely Destroy Zionist Regime. IRNA, April 3, 2024. - <https://ru.irna.ir/amp/85433996/>

12 Kaledgy V. Red Lines in Iran’s Foreign Policy with Regards to Israeli-Palestinian Conflicts. Valdai club., February 9, 2024 - <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/krasnye-linii-vneshney-politiki-irana/>

13 Teheran Said It Is Prepared to Change Nuclear Doctrine in Case Of Nuclear Blackmail. Anadolu Ajansi, May 13, 2024. - <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/Иран-заявил-о-готовности-изменить-ядерную-доктрину-в-случае-ядерного-шантажа/3217839>

14 Russia’s Collective Security Concept in the Gulf region. Full text. TASS., July 23, 2024. - <https://tass.ru/politics/6695215/amp>

territorial integrity, non-use of force and peaceful resolution of disputes while taking into account the interests of all parties.

However, Russia advocates for involving extra-regional powers, including permanent members of the UN Security Council, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation early in the process – at the initial stage of consultations and forming working groups. Iran, in contrast, believes that the Gulf nations should first work out the details themselves before inviting outside players and permanent members of the UN Security Council, and leaving the US involvement until last.

The proposed order of extra-regional involvement reflects Iran's concerns about the anti-Iranian stance embedded in the Abraham Accords, spearheaded by the US and Israel, which aim to normalize relations between Israel and Arab countries, fostering cooperation not only in trade and economic areas but also in security<sup>15</sup>. Some of the Gulf states have already signed onto the accords, but expanding this initiative, particularly by securing a deal with Saudi Arabia, seems unlikely given the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

◆ **Given the current extremely tense situation in the Middle East, the prospects for establishing any collective security system remain bleak. Such a framework would only be possible after finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict acceptable to all the regional stakeholders and addressing issues related to Iran's nuclear program.**

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<sup>15</sup> Khalturina I., Abraham Accords. Sunrise of New Middle East, or What Will Happen to Trump's Plan Under Biden? Region Plus, December 15, 2020. - <http://regionplus.az/ru/articles/view/7271>

## 4. Trade. Economic and Defense Cooperation

◆ **In response to expanding Western sanctions, Moscow and Tehran are intensifying their trade and economic ties.**

Iran cannot fully compensate for Moscow's loss of access to high-tech Western markets, of course, but it can certainly share its vast experience in import substitution, parallel imports and effective sanction dodging techniques, developed over decades, to be used for Russia's economy.

Similarly, Russia is unable to completely meet the Iranian economy's demand for many high-tech goods, nor does it have substantial investment resources. Nevertheless, there are several areas where bilateral cooperation is thriving, helping both countries overcome sanctions. These include nuclear and thermal energy, engineering, rail transport, the oil and gas sector, agriculture, and the development of transport corridors.

◆ **The closure of Western markets for Moscow and the disruption of European logistics chains has made Iran a more attractive transportation hub.**

In 2000, at the second Euro-Asian Conference on Transport, Russia, Iran and India signed an agreement to create the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), running from the port of St. Petersburg through Iran to the Indian port of Mumbai, covering a total distance of 7,200 km.

The project involves three routes: an eastern railway route through Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran; a trans-Caspian route using ports and highways in Russia and Iran; and a western railway route through Azerbaijan<sup>16</sup>.

The delayed launch of the land routes was due to the limited capacity of the road and rail networks in all of the participating countries. The maritime route faced challenges from insufficient capacity at Russian and Iranian ports, lack of rail connections and a shortage of ships<sup>17</sup>.

Ultimately, the first commercial cargo shipments only started to be transported via the eastern and trans-Caspian routes in 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Iran Expects the Works on North South Corridor Will Start in 2024. RIA Novosti, May 17, 2024. - <https://ria.ru/amp/20240517/iran-1946650054.html>

<sup>17</sup> Nikitina M., North South Corridor. Point of No Return for Goods and Logistics. Session on Trends of Russia's Transport Sector Economic Development. Foresight, Forecasts, Strategies. April 20, 2023. - [https://ntranslab.ru/local/templates/default/public/img/MTK\\_SEVER\\_YuG\\_21\\_04\\_1.pdf](https://ntranslab.ru/local/templates/default/public/img/MTK_SEVER_YuG_21_04_1.pdf)

In 2023, agreements were signed to complete the construction of the 165 km Rasht-Astara railway section by 2027. By 2030, the freight turnover is expected to reach 45 million tons, with long-term potential to reach 100 million tons<sup>18</sup>.

## 5. The Outlook for Russia–Iran Relations

◆ According to the Iranian leadership, tragic death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a plane crash in May 2024 will not affect the friendly nature of Russia-Iran relations or hinder their continued development<sup>19</sup>.

In an unexpected outcome of the snap presidential election held in late June to early July 2024, reformist candidate Masoud Pezeshkian defeated conservative candidates by a narrow margin in two rounds of voting. This came as a surprise for everyone in and out of Iran. Some speculate this outcome might have been tactically arranged by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who sought to engage as many Iranians as possible in the election process, especially reformist supporters, to strengthen the legitimacy of the Islamic regime and introduce some democratic elements into Iran's political life.

Khamenei was not deterred by Pezeshkian's declared intention, as part of a "multi-vector policy", to develop relations with Western countries, including the US, in an effort to ease sanctions or lift them altogether. Iranian conservatives are as interested in this goal as the reformists. Therefore, Pezeshkian now has a chance to achieve what President Hassan Rouhani, another advocate of reforms, failed to do in the 2010s.

At the same time, the newly elected president of Iran has affirmed his commitment to continue developing relations with Russia, a key foreign policy priority of Iran's Supreme Leader. During a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 8, 2024, Masoud Pezeshkian expressed his

<sup>18</sup> Ravandi-Fadan L., North South Transport Corridor and Its Significance for Iran. RIAC, July 26, 2023. - <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/mezhdunarodnyy-transportnyy-koridor-sever-yug-i-ego-znachenie-dlya-irana/?ysclid=m1mq1m4quy332232962>

<sup>19</sup> Teheran Will Not Change Its Approach to Cooperation with Moscow, Iran's Foreign Ministry Said. RIA Novosti, May 23, 2024. - <https://ria.ru/amp/20240523/iran-1947818554.html>

readiness for close collaboration to further expand mutually beneficial Russian-Iranian cooperation in various fields. The two leaders agreed to meet in person by the end of 2024<sup>20</sup>.

- ◆ **The convergence of geopolitical interests, increasing military, political and sanctions pressure on Moscow and Tehran, as well as the drastic escalation of tensions on the European continent and in the Middle East have strengthened the resolve of both Russia and Iran's top leadership to elevate their relations to the level of active strategic partnership. The factors mentioned above create favorable prospects for further comprehensive and mutually beneficial cooperation between these two nations.**

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<sup>20</sup> Putin Talked on the Phone with Elected President of Iran. TASS, July 8, 2024. - <https://tass.ru/politika/21307745/amp>



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