

Iran and Russia's 'co-opetition'

A delicate dance of strategic
cooperation and competition



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Eduard Abrahamyan Ph.D., is a political scientist and senior research fellow at the Institute for Security Analysis, and Teaching Fellow at University College London. A University of Leicester doctoral graduate, he advised former Armenian president and regularly contributes to IHS Markit, The Jamestown Foundation, The National Interest, Foreign Policy Research Institute, and the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. contributor to the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of (AFPC), Foreign Policy Research Institute, etc.



Gevorg Melikyan, PhD is a policy analyst and former political advisor of former President of Armenia (2018-22) with considerable professional expertise in foreign and security policies, Theories of International Relations, military alliances, post-Soviet/Eurasian space studies, conflict management, and hybrid wars. Currently, he is the founder and CEO of the Armenian Institute for Resilience and Statecraft.

INTRODUCTION

As the world undergoes a highly transformative phase, new contenders are emerging to contest the global landscape. Some, such as Russia and China, are global players. Others, such as Iran and Türkiye, are regional players positioning themselves as challengers to the established US-led liberal world order.

The shifting dynamics raise some unsettling questions about the future of international stability and cooperation, as conflicting ideologies and interests come to the fore and jockey for position.

Russia employs its military and cyber capabilities to undermine international institutions and norms, seeking to reshape global power dynamics. China's remarkable economic growth and technological prowess have propelled it into a position of global prominence, challenging traditional Western dominance.

Iran employs a combination of regional alliances and nuclear ambitions to challenge the status quo, often defying international agreements in the process. Türkiye projects its influence through a mixture of assertive foreign policy, historical narratives, and regional interventions, positioning itself as an alternative power center.

Collectively, these nations, which exhibit some remarkable resemblances, seek to redefine the contours of global politics, challenge established norms, and promote their own visions of world governance and international relations.

Against this evolving backdrop, Russia and Iran are molding a strategic relationship and strengthening their bond globally, in light of their intersecting interests and given that they are both subject to strict Western sanctions, while also navigating issues in regional realms on which their views diverge.

Their strategic alignment, and its limits, reflect a broader dynamic within the Eurasian order, the implications of which will



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significantly affect global stability and the nature of international politics in the broader region in the mid-term.

This report will examine the complex interactions between Russia and Iran, and in particular construct a gripping tale by exploring three primary dimensions of their strategic interplay, which is a tapestry of both cooperative and competitive threads — a dance of strategic “co-opetition,” so to speak.

Firstly, we will dissect the close ties between Moscow and Tehran on the global stage, which are anchored in a unified endeavor to counterbalance or impede the West’s strategic and ideological influence, especially that of the US, within their traditional spheres.

Then we will delve into their “co-opetition” in the South Caucasus, highlighting the inherent contradictions and limits of convergence. Finally, we turn our gaze toward their ongoing engagements in the Near East. The pivotal regional role of Turkiye in connection with regional

Reports say Russia has been using Iranian-made Shahed-129 drones in its war on Ukraine. AFP

interactions between Russia and Iran will largely be deferred for a more comprehensive exploration in a separate report.

A SHARED VISION OF POST-AMERICAN MULTIPOLARITY

In-depth discussions surrounding the strategic rapprochement between Russia and Iran, fueled by a shared vision for the world order and compatible models of government and threat perceptions, are commonplace, especially when considering their strategic alignments in various regional contexts.

Iran’s de facto material provisions for Russia in the latter’s interventionist and revisionist war against Ukraine, in which Kyiv has the unequivocal support of the US-led institutional West, have recently underscored the reciprocal strategic alignment between Moscow and Tehran. By agreeing to provide Shahid and Mohajer drone systems, Iran positioned itself in full accord with Russia, seemingly wagering that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s determination and the



strength of his country's military would result in his triumph both on the battlefield and in the realm of world politics¹.

After a series of crises that characterized relations between Russia and Iran during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev between 2008 and 2012 — most notably due to Russia siding with the West over Iran's nuclear program², Moscow's procrastination about arms supplies to Tehran amid Western sanctions, and the Kremlin's perception of Iran as a competitor in energy exports — the ties between the two countries were enhanced in the geopolitical sphere upon Putin's return to office³.

Between 2014 and 2020, their collaboration became increasingly evident as they jointly supported and shielded Syria from what they perceived as malign Western interference. Since then, both the Kremlin and Tehran have advocated a multipolar world order characterized by fewer Western traits and a dominant illiberal value system.

As both powers emphasized in March 2023, this joint approach serves as a resolute

Six countries, including Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were invited in Aug. 2023 to become BRICS members. AFP

repudiation of the “collective West's” destabilizing trajectory that seeks to supplant established international legal frameworks with an American-conceived “rules-based order⁴.”

In 2021, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, said during a press conference with his Iranian counterpart: “My Iranian friends and I reject the Western-promoted, neocolonial, rules-based world order that is developed in private, bypassing universal structures with the aim of subsequently trying to impose them on everyone else⁵.”

As they shaped the common ground in their world views, Moscow and Tehran started to collaborate closely with the aim of minimizing US-led Western influences and enhancing the impact of non-Western powers in international politics, in cooperation with rising powers such as Türkiye, China and, to a certain extent, India.

Some nuanced alignment in international affairs was underscored by the Russia-Iran declaration of 2020, which firmly stated their opposition to the “unilateral” ambitions of



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extraregional actors. This included actions such as the imposition of sanctions, military interventions, and the exertion of influence through the promotion of specific norms⁶.

Crucially, Moscow and Tehran emphasize the principle of noninterference, leveraging it as a counter against Western interventions. They believe in this principle as a means to safeguard not only their domestic affairs — in which they view Western actions as the “extraterritorial application” of foreign laws, or attempts to overthrow governments — but also the external policies of states⁷.

This means that Russia and Iran use the principle of nonintervention to shield their foreign-policy actions, by countering Western critiques and justifying their own external interventions against reactions from extraregional actors.

Collectively, both powers advocate for a regionalized, multipolar world, as they seek to limit the political influence of external, Western actors in regions that affect their strategic interests, and promote an illiberal value system and non-Western norms of political conduct. To achieve this, they emphasize the importance of filling regional vacuums created by the seemingly declining US-led world order with new, integrative initiatives. For example, Iran is actively engaging with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union to establish a free-trade area⁸ and is in the process of operationalizing its recently approved membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization⁹.

Concurrently, Russia was keen to support Iran’s aspirations to join BRICS — a grouping of emerging economies that currently includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, and which recently invited Iran, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the UAE to join — as a stepping stone toward “expanding bilateral interaction in international and regional affairs¹⁰.”

Another illustration of the growing shift toward cooperative integration was a joint meeting of the heads of member states of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in September 2021¹¹. This meeting — which was characterized by distinctly anti-NATO and anti-US sentiments, such as interpreting the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan as a sign of Western weakness — was notably

attended by Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi even though Iran was, at the time, not a member of either organization.

RAISI’S PRESENCE FUELED SPECULATION IN

diplomatic circles about Iran’s ostensibly reinvigorated interest in joining the CSTO, especially after its subsequent induction into the SCO in July 2023. Such indications of Tehran’s renewed interest in joining the former group are new and were deliberated on multiple occasions prior to the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008¹². The political dividends, from an Iranian perspective, were explained in terms of facilitating the exchange of arms and military technologies among the targets of Western sanctions, within the broader framework of a collective defense alliance, further contributing to the non-Western-military-bloc mentality within international affairs in Eurasia¹³.

Should Iran join the CSTO, it would be the first country from outside the former Soviet Union to do so. Overall, Russia and Iran’s shared West-challenging geopolitical stance serves to rationalize their proactive integrative engagements, particularly in the context of a desire to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions and counter perceived US efforts to isolate them from broader Eurasian security and geoeconomic affairs¹⁴.

On one hand, Moscow might try to leverage Iran’s CSTO candidacy to show an ability to forge alliances beyond its perceived immediate sphere of influence, even at times of politico-military failures in Ukraine, thus bolstering its geopolitical influence and additionally legitimizing the collective security framework it dominates.

On the other hand, opponents of Tehran’s growing influence, or its integration into the CSTO, might use it to highlight potential shifts in power dynamics and the expansion of non-Western military blocs, raising concerns about the balance of power in the wider Eurasia region.

CAUCASUS AS A FOCAL POINT FOR ‘CO-OPETITION’ BETWEEN RUSSIA AND IRAN

Engagement by Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus presents a unique tableau, especially following the shifts in the power balance brought about by the strategic defeat

of Armenia in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which was unleashed by Azerbaijan, with the involvement of Türkiye and Russia's tacit approval, in 2020.

It, too, reveals converging and diverging strategic interests. This conjunction of cooperation and competition highlights the emerging regionalized multipolarity, a trend that sometimes goes unnoticed due to the prevailing tendency among observers of Iran and Russia to focus on aspects of strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran that have greater implications for global affairs, rather than delve into their sectoral disagreements in a regional context.

While both nations prioritize a stable balance of power in the Caucasus, free of significant Western influence, they have clear differences of opinion on what the regional power and politico-economic configuration of the region among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia should look like.

In terms of regional power dynamics, Russia and Iran are driven by a shared ambition to support the 3+3 initiative proposed by Azerbaijan and Türkiye in 2021, which would also involve Armenia and Georgia. The platform would champion regional integration efforts while excluding external actors, primarily those from the West. This discourages Georgia from joining the initiative, as it compounds existing reluctance as a result of ongoing unresolved territorial disputes with Russia¹⁵.

From the perspective of major regional players Russia, Iran and Türkiye, the 3+3 initiative aims to shape them into an external strategic triangle within the format and harmonize their strategic interests with those of smaller nations Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, which would constitute its internal strategic triangle.

In this context, the Astana process, launched by Türkiye, Russia and Iran in 2017 as part of the Syrian peace process, serves as both a model for such tripartite coordination and a precedent for unified actions in the Caucasus. Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, even labeled it the main trilateral order-forming mechanism, adding that it was "already targeted by the West¹⁶."

Overall, the 3+3 framework is perceived as another geopolitical means to counteract Western influence, and more specifically challenging what Ankara, Moscow and

Tehran see as the West's norms-driven encroachments, which they believe are anchored in the principles of a US-endorsed liberal order.

In this vein, Azerbaijan, the most ambitious and dominance-seeking state among those in the South Caucasus, seeks to play a pivotal role in helping to align the interests of the external strategic triangle within the 3+3, and in shaping a new, non-Western regional order in the region, in pursuit of its own aspirations for subregional ascendancy that is seemingly accepted by the three major powers.

Baku has long championed trilateral strategic dialogue involving Moscow and Ankara, a stance that was recently reaffirmed by President Ilham Aliyev when he said: "Azerbaijan is an ally for both Russia and Türkiye¹⁷."

Simultaneously, Baku has been highly proactive in advocating for a Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran strategic forum. The first such forum convened in Baku in 2016 and was hailed by the Azeri foreign minister as a "globally important¹⁸" initiative that paves way for new level of tripartite engagement in the region.

Therefore, while Azerbaijan is working to strengthen geopolitical ties between Türkiye, Russia and Iran, it also acts as a conduit for strategic dialogue between Russia and Iran. This was underscored when the governments of the two regional powers noted Azerbaijan's pivotal role in providing a sustained geoeconomic bridge between Moscow and Tehran, including in terms of transit energy and infrastructure¹⁹.

In recent years, the framework encompassing Russia, Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Iran has emerged as a pivotal axis for politico-economic integration. Notable developments include an energy system integration agreement between Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran that was signed this year²⁰, and the expedited construction of the International North-South Transport Corridor which, according to the 2022 trilateral Baku Declaration²¹, will link Iran and Russia via Azerbaijani road and rail infrastructure.

Such initiatives herald a new era of politico-economic and energy cooperation between Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran. As an illustration of this evolution, Moscow has committed to a €1.3 billion (\$1.4 billion) investment in



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Azerbaijan's railroad logistics. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk justified this investment as a manifestation of "Russia's strategic reorientation toward Eurasia²²," underscoring Azerbaijan's integral role in the enhancement of strategic infrastructural communication with Iran and, by extension, South Asia.

Azerbaijan's alignment with Russia-Iran dynamics also has ideological underpinnings. Baku, under the Aliyev regime, promotes a non-European model of state development that prevents normative influences from the West.

This disposition of President Aliyev is evident in a series of statements and declarations made in conjunction with Russian counterparts over the course of a decade. These diplomatic exchanges reflect a mutual commitment to fostering a "just world order" founded on the principles of "sovereign equity and non-interference²³."

The 2022 Russia-Azerbaijan Declaration of Allied Interaction openly reaffirmed this commitment, with both parties explicitly

Russian President Putin and Azeri President Aliyev held talks ahead of meeting with leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Sochi on Oct. 31, 2022. AFP

underscoring the importance of a "multipolar world order" in which the UN occupies a central role and "Russia's leading role in regional integrative initiatives²⁴" is formally acknowledged.

This stance positions Azerbaijan as a reliable partner for Russia, Türkiye and Iran in their regional ambitions, opening up avenues for Baku to seek acceptance of its ascendancy over neighbors Armenia and Georgia from at least two major powers in the region, namely Russia and Türkiye.

But while the activities of Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus showcase their cooperation, they also reveal diverging strategic interests that are riddled with mutual suspicions and longstanding reservations.

Both nations, for example, seek to leverage the geographical position of Caucasus states for their own respective benefits. A recent notable point of contention between Moscow and Tehran was the proposed "Zangezur Corridor." This transport route, which Armenia fiercely opposes, is designed



Russian and US troops exchanged friendly greetings on a northeast Syria highway on Oct. 8, 2022. AFP

to connect Azerbaijan's mainland with its autonomous enclave, Nakhichevan. In doing so, it would traverse Armenian territory under the direct control of Russian security forces.

From Moscow's strategic and logistical perspective, this would create a direct land route from Russia to Türkiye via Azerbaijan, mirroring the strategic connections between Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran. The proposal for the corridor was put forward by Azerbaijan and Türkiye, with Russian backing, but is staunchly opposed by Iran, which interprets it as an attempt to alter its border with Armenia²⁵. Tehran fears the corridor would detrimentally affect the border and hence its access to Georgia. Elaborating on Iranian concerns, Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader, emphasized that creating a corridor connection between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan would have two primary consequences: "firstly, it would divide Armenia into two separate parts, and secondly, it would sever the connection between Iran and Armenia." This,

he believes, would contribute to isolating Iran and minimizing its role in the region's geopolitics²⁶. Perceiving Türkiye as the weakest link in anti-Western endeavors of the external triangle he expresses confusion that endorsing the corridor agenda deviates from their initial plan to limit Western influence in the Caucasus geopolitics. Interestingly, touching upon the points of contention, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan conceded that the challenges in implementing the project stem from Iran rather than Armenia²⁷.

On the wider issue of Armenia, there is historical discontent between Russia and Iran. For example, an Iranian former diplomat, who wished to remain anonymous, told the authors of this report that Tehran has long been critical of Armenia's decision to use Russian FSB forces as guards along its border with Iran²⁸. This choice, the source said, reveals Armenia's political weakness on the international stage.

Furthermore, during the lengthy negotiations led by the administration of



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US President Barack Obama for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, more commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, Iranian foreign policy chiefs viewed the declared intentions of Georgia and Armenia to sign an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement (DCFTA) with the EU as a potential gateway for Iran to access European markets²⁹.

As a result, Tehran viewed the prospective integration of Armenia and Georgia with the EU in a relatively positive light, driven by the potential economic benefits. However, Armenia's unexpected shift in 2013, when it abandoned lengthy negotiations over the EU agreements in favor of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, was interpreted as a blow to Iranian aspirations.

As stated by the Iranian former diplomat, this move allowed Russia to use Armenia as a geopolitical "cork" in its broader Caucasus strategy, hampering Iran's access to European markets³⁰. This hindered Iran's efforts to establish connections with the West through the Caucasus during a period of Iranian foreign-policy recalibration pioneered by President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif.

RUSSIA AND IRAN'S NEAR EAST DYNAMICS

The alignment of Iran and Russia in opposition to Western influences in the Near East showcases other shared objectives. Yet, beneath this cooperative veneer lie nuanced examples of competitiveness. This is evident, most notably, in their involvement in the Syrian conflict, where differing motivations and strategies reflect the individual pursuit by both nations of dominance in the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Near East. While they might occasionally collaborate on specific issues, the underlying rivalry is a constant undercurrent to their interactions.

Iran's steadfast support for Syrian President Bashar Assad stems from its strategic goal of establishing cultural and religious influence. The alliance between Tehran and the Syrian regime is all the more striking for the fact it is based neither on shared national interests nor religious values, but rather is a tactical and strategic partnership between two authoritarian regimes³¹.

Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict,

on the other hand, is driven by a desire to preserve its naval base in Tartus, expand its regional footprint, project its military prowess on the global stage, and keep Westerners out³².

While the Assad regime is characterized as secular and Iran operates as a theocracy, it is important to note that Tehran's support for the regime is rooted in religious sectarianism. Conversely, Russia's assistance primarily focuses on bolstering the regime's autocratic leadership which, despite being secular, exhibits overt anti-Western tendencies. This divergence between Moscow and Tehran is even more apparent when considering their interactions with the various factions within Syria. Iran's close ties with Shiite militias align with its broader regional ambitions, but this approach might exacerbate sectarian tensions. Meanwhile, Russia pursues alliances with a broader spectrum of forces, including some opposition groups, with the aim of shaping a post-conflict Syria that better aligns with its interests.

These differing strategies, while not necessarily so incompatible as to lead to direct confrontation, nonetheless reveal the nuanced element of competition that exists between Iran and Russia as they engage in a delicate interplay of cooperation and rivalry within the dynamic geopolitical realm of the Near East.

CONCLUSION: THE INTRIGUING INTERPLAY OF POWER AND AMBITION

As we can see, the evolving relationship between Russia and Iran unfolds as a captivating narrative of strategic "co-opetition," reflecting the intricate nature of modern, highly complex, interconnected and unpredictable "quantum geopolitics."

This strategic "co-opetition" stands as a counterforce to Western influence, in which the collaborative and competitive efforts of Iran and Russia converge to challenge established norms and power structures, despite their heterogeneous ambitions.

These interactions are not only defying conventional regional paradigms but also relentlessly reshaping broader Eurasian dynamics, driven by an unwavering ambition to establish a new world order devoid of Western influence.

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