



36/2022

19/04/2022

María Ballesteros Miguel\*

## Russia's relationship with Iran in the context of the 21st century geopolitics

### *Russia's relationship with Iran in the context of the 21st century geopolitics*

#### *Abstract:*

*Since the 2000s, with the arrival in power of Putin, Russia has been pulling away from Western countries, while increasing its cooperation with non-Western ones like Iran. Even though Russia's relations with Iran have historically been uneasy, they have improved since the late 1970s. Nevertheless, their cooperation has not increased as much as their leaders have pretended to. Among the reasons for this, the following three stand out: Russia's pragmatic approach to its foreign policy, their mutual distrust from their past relations, and their incompatible interests in the Middle East. Overall, Russia and Iran have common geoeconomic interests, especially in the Caspian Sea. However, their conflicting interests in the Middle East have not allowed them to become strategic allies. Acknowledging Russia's pragmatic approach to its foreign policy and the role of geopolitics is key to approach the international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

#### *Keywords:*

*Russia, Iran, geopolitics, Middle East, Caspian Sea.*

#### **How to quote:**

BALLESTEROS MIGUEL, María. *Russia's relationship with Iran in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics*. Opinion Paper IEEE 36/2022.  
[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2022/DIEEEO36\\_2022\\_MARBAL\\_Rusia\\_EN\\_G.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEO36_2022_MARBAL_Rusia_EN_G.pdf) and/or [link bie](#)<sup>3</sup> (accessed on the web day/month/year)

\*NOTE: The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

## Introduction

This paper analyzes how have Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests influenced its relations with Iran in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the 2000s, with the arrival in power of Putin, Russia has been pulling away from Western countries, while increasing its cooperation with others like Iran.

The presence of Russia in the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) dates to the medieval times, and it has fluctuated over time. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow's foreign policy mostly vanished, as it entered a period of economic recovery<sup>1</sup>. Although its return to the region was not debated until its military intervention in Syria, in 2015, different scholars have argued that Russia's comeback had started in the 2000s<sup>2</sup>. Since then, Russia has adopted a much more pragmatic approach, promoting its security and economic interests, which has translated into the promotion of the region's stability<sup>3</sup>. Overall, Russia's role in the region is both strategic and opportunistic, as it is based on a short-term strategy to promote its domestic interests, as well as a long-term revisionist aim<sup>4</sup>.

Concerning the Russian-Iranian partnership, the two countries have a long history of uneasy relations because of colliding historical, ideological, geopolitical and strategic roots. Despite this, in the late 1970s and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, several regional and global events have led them to a rapprochement<sup>5</sup>. In particular, two major developments are to be remarked. First, the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which ended Iran's alignment with the

---

<sup>1</sup> TRENIN, Dmitri, "What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?", pp. 34-35, Polity, Cambridge, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> LOVOTTI, Chiara and TALBOT, Valeria, "The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa Region. Strategy or Opportunism?", European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> CARBONI, German, "Russian Interests in the MENA Region", Institute for a Greater Europe, 2020, available at <https://www.institutegreatereurope.com/single-post/2020/05/22/russian-in-the-mena-region>. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

ISSAEV, Leonid, "Russia and the New Middle East", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 23:3, 423-442, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/19448953.2021.1888245.

<sup>4</sup> OMElicheva, Mariya, "Russia's Foreign Policy toward Iran: A Critical Geopolitics Perspective", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 14:3, 331-344, 2012, DOI: 10.1080/19448953.2012.720777.

REZVANI, Babak, "Russian foreign policy and geopolitics in the Post-Soviet space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 56:6, 878-899. 2020, DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2020.1775590.

OUALAALOU, David, "An Overview of Russia's Geopolitics" in OUALAALOU, David, "The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics. Remaking the Global Order", pp. 1-18, Springer, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> JOOBANI, Hossein Aghaie and MOUSAVIPUR, Mostafa, "Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Moving Towards Strategic Synergy in the Middle East?", p. 142, *Strategic Analysis*, 39:2, 141-155, 2015, DOI: 10.1080/09700161.2014.1000658.

US and led it to regional isolation, as Arab states feared the spread of the revolution<sup>6</sup>. And second, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which not only entailed the end of a neo-imperialist policy of Iran's neighbor, but also the loss of their common borders<sup>7</sup>.

It is in a context of isolation and sanctions from the West that both Russia and Iran have adopted revisionist approaches, calling for a better relationship with the East<sup>8</sup>. Besides, both countries share common security and economic interests, as the development of oil and gas in the Caspian Sea and the Syrian crisis<sup>9</sup>. Overall, their cooperation has progressively increased, but not as much as their leaders have pretended because of three main reasons: Russia's pragmatic approach to its foreign policy, their mutual distrust from their past relations, and their conflicting interests in the Middle East.

Accounting for this historical context, this paper analyses the evolution of the relations between Russia and Iran, as well as their geoeconomic interests in the Caspian region, and their geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Studying Russia's geopolitical interests is important for countries to understand its approach to the Middle East and other world regions, and thus, be able to design a strategy to approach it. With the current context of tensions, doing this has become very important, if not essential.

### Russian-Iranian relations

As mentioned above, the relations between Russia and Iran were tumultuous until the end of the 20th century. Then, in 1989, they publicly declared their political ties, with the promise of protecting their mutual interests and increasing their cooperation with non-Western countries. There are three main factors that have influenced their relations. First, the US' influence on Iran and the Middle East during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Second, their nuclear links, since they have signed agreements of nuclear cooperation. In fact,

---

<sup>6</sup> AHMADIAN, Hassan, "Iran and the New Geopolitics of the Middle East: In Search of Equilibrium". *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, p. 460, 23:3, 458-472, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/19448953.2021.1888247.

<sup>7</sup> TAROCK, Adam, "Iran and Russia in 'strategic alliance'", *Third World Quarterly*, 18:2, 207-224, 1997, DOI: 10.1080/01436599714911.

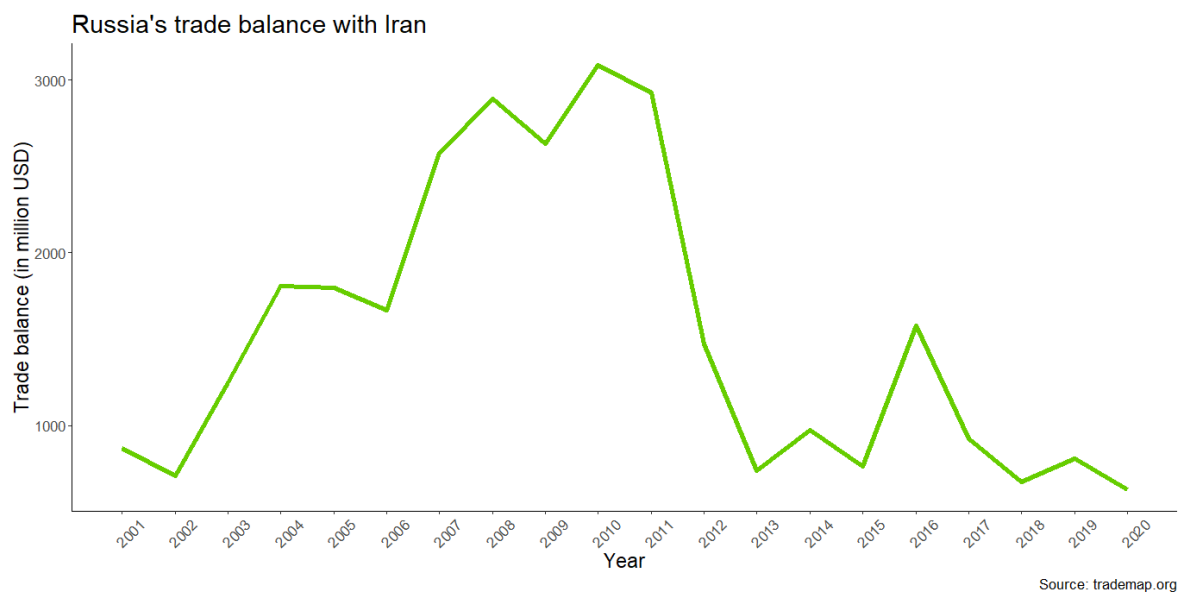
<sup>8</sup> PURI, Samir, "The Strategic Hedging of Iran, Russia, and China: Juxtaposing Participation in the Global System with Regional Revisionism", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 0(0), 1-17, 2017, DOI:10.1093/jogss/ogx015.

REZAEI, Farhad, "Iran and Russia: Completing the Pivot to the East?" in REZAEI, Farhad, "Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement", pp.51-8, *Middle East Today*, 2019, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-76789-5\_3.

<sup>9</sup> CRISS, Nur Bilge and GÜNER, Serdar, "Geopolitical Configurations The Russia-Turkey-Iran Triangle", *Security Dialogue*, 30(3), 365-376, 1999.

Russia has used Iran's nuclear program to bargain in its negotiations with the West. And third, their common turn to Asia, with opportunities to cooperate in political and economic sectors<sup>10</sup>.

Moving to their economic relations, they have been unstable. Although between the late 1990s and 2008, their total trade highly expanded, it progressively fell from 2011 to 2015 and has, since then, barely managed to recover<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, Russia's trade balance with Iran has evolved in a similar way, steeply increasing between 2002 and 2010, while decreasing from 2011 onwards (see *Graph 1* below). Since Russia's imports from Iran are low and hardly change (see *Graph 2* below), a decrease in Russia's trade balance necessarily implies a drop of Russia's exports to Iran. Overall, although Iran is more economically dependent on Russia, none of them are among each other's main trading partners, as their percentages of total imports from one another are very low (see *Graph 2* below).



Graph 1: "Russia's trade balance with Iran (2001-2020)". Self-elaboration.

<sup>10</sup> REZAEI, op. cit., 2019.

<sup>11</sup> TALDYBAYEVA, Dinara, "Current State of Iran-Russia Economic Relations", Eurasian Research Institute, Kazakhstan, No. 154, 2018, available at <https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Weekly-e-bulletin-06.03.2018-12.03.2018-No-154.pdf>



Graph 2: "Percentage of total imports from Russia and Iran (2001-2018). Self-elaboration.

With respect to the reasoning behind their unstable relations, it appears to be a consequence of the sanctions that the international community has imposed against Iran's nuclear program. In particular, in 2010, the UN executed an embargo on the export of most major conventional weapons to Iran. As Russia's exports to this country are mainly composed by military goods, it is reasonable that these exports decreased since then. Besides, the US and the EU imposed economic sanctions against Iran's oil and banking sector and any third contracting party. Then, in 2015, the adoption of the Nuclear Deal ended the previous sanctions against Iran, although it left in place the embargo on heavy arms<sup>12</sup>.

Despite their lack of significant economic progress, the Russian-Iranian growing ties have been reflected through their increasing cooperation within the region of Eurasia. As revisionist countries that have adopted an Asian look, they have become part of common regional agreements and initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> SIPRI, "UN arms embargo on Iran", n.d., Last updated Apr. 7, 2021, Available at [https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un\\_arms\\_embargoes/iran](https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/iran). [Accessed 9 December 2021].

Arms Control Association, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance", (2021), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>. [Accessed 30 December 2021].

BBC News, "Iran nuclear deal: What it all means", 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>. [Accessed 9 December 2021].

<sup>13</sup> Tehran Times, "Iran becomes full member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization", 2021, available at

## Geoeconomic interests: the importance of resources

Despite their limited economic cooperation Russia and Iran have common geoeconomic interests, being their resources a crucial part of their economies. In the case of Russia, it is the country with the biggest reserves of natural gas and the second world producer after the US. Besides, it takes the 8<sup>th</sup> position in petroleum reserves, and it is the first producer of crude petroleum<sup>14</sup>. Moving to the case of Iran, it is the second and third-largest reserve holder of gas and oil, accordingly. In 2019, Iran's major exports were, by far, crude petroleum, despite the limitation imposed since 2017 by the international sanctions against the country<sup>15</sup>.

Despite not being among each other's trading partners, they have recognized the important of cooperating in the area. First, in 2017, the National Iranian Oil Company signed various agreements with Russian companies such as Rosfnet and Gazprom for joint operations in Iranian oil fields. Under these deals, Iranian companies buy Russian equipment and technology in exchange for oil contracts, so that Russia can sell it to third countries. The value's estimation of these agreements rose from \$30bn in 2017 to \$50bn in 2018<sup>16</sup>. These deals are part of Russia's strategy to increase its role in the Middle East, become an intermediary between the US and Iran, and ensure its predominance as an energy supplier to the EU. Besides, accounting for Iran's international isolation, Russia provides Iran's energy sector the much-needed foreign investment.

And second, the Caspian Sea has been found to be one of the most important scenarios for the Russian-Iranian cooperation in the energy sector. For starters, it is the largest

---

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/465134/Iran-becomes-full-member-of-Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>. [Accessed 2 January 2022].

MIKOVIC, Nikola. "Iran wants to join the Eurasian Economic Union — but will Russia allow it?", Arab News, 2021, available at <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1816451>. [Accessed 30 December 2021].

BHARDWAJ, Naina, "India's Export Opportunities Along the International North South Transport Corridor", India Briefing, 2022, available at <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/indias-export-opportunities-along-the-international-north-south-transport-corridor-22412.html/>. [Accessed 30 December 2021].

<sup>14</sup> PIEDRAS, Beatriz, "Geostrategia energética de Rusia en Europa". Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 101, 2017, available at [https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2017/DIEEEO101-2017\\_Rusia\\_BeatrizPiedras.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2017/DIEEEO101-2017_Rusia_BeatrizPiedras.pdf). [Accessed 4 January 2022].

<sup>15</sup> EIA, "Iran, Executive summary", n.d., last updated July 20, 2021, available at <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRN>. [Accessed 4 January 2022].

OECD "Iran", n.d., available at <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/irn#historical-data>. [Accessed 4 January 2022].

<sup>16</sup> FOY, Henry, BOZORGMEHR, Najmeh and RAVAL, Anjili, "Russia and Iran sign \$30bn energy agreements", Financial Times, 2017, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/141e6662-bf11-11e7-9836-b25f8adaa111>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].

FOY, Henry and BOZORGMEHR, Najmeh, "Russia ready to invest \$50bn in Iran's energy industry", Financial Times, 2018, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/db4c44c8-869b-11e8-96dd-fa565ec55929>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].

inland water body of the earth, containing more than 40% of the total world's inland waters<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, it is bordered by Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, being very relevant both in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms. On the one hand, it connects countries without a land border, such as Iran and Russia. Likewise, it serves as a buffer between countries that differ in politics and ideology. On the other hand, the Caspian is very rich in oil and gas, as well as other resources (see *Map 1* below). In fact, some of the most important oil and gas pipelines depart from the Caspian region to Russia, Europe, and Turkey.

Because of all the latter, the status of this sea has persistently been disputed between its five bordering countries. In 2018, they signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, giving the Sea a special legal status and dividing it into internal waters, territorial waters, fishery zones and the common maritime space<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, Iran's lack of ratification hasn't allowed the convention to enter into force<sup>19</sup>. As *Map 1* shows below, there are still disputed areas in the Sea. This is because, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Iran's share of the sea was greatly reduced, leading to public criticism within the country<sup>20</sup>. In this sense, any new discovery of resources may bring tensions between the five countries regarding who has the right to exploit them.

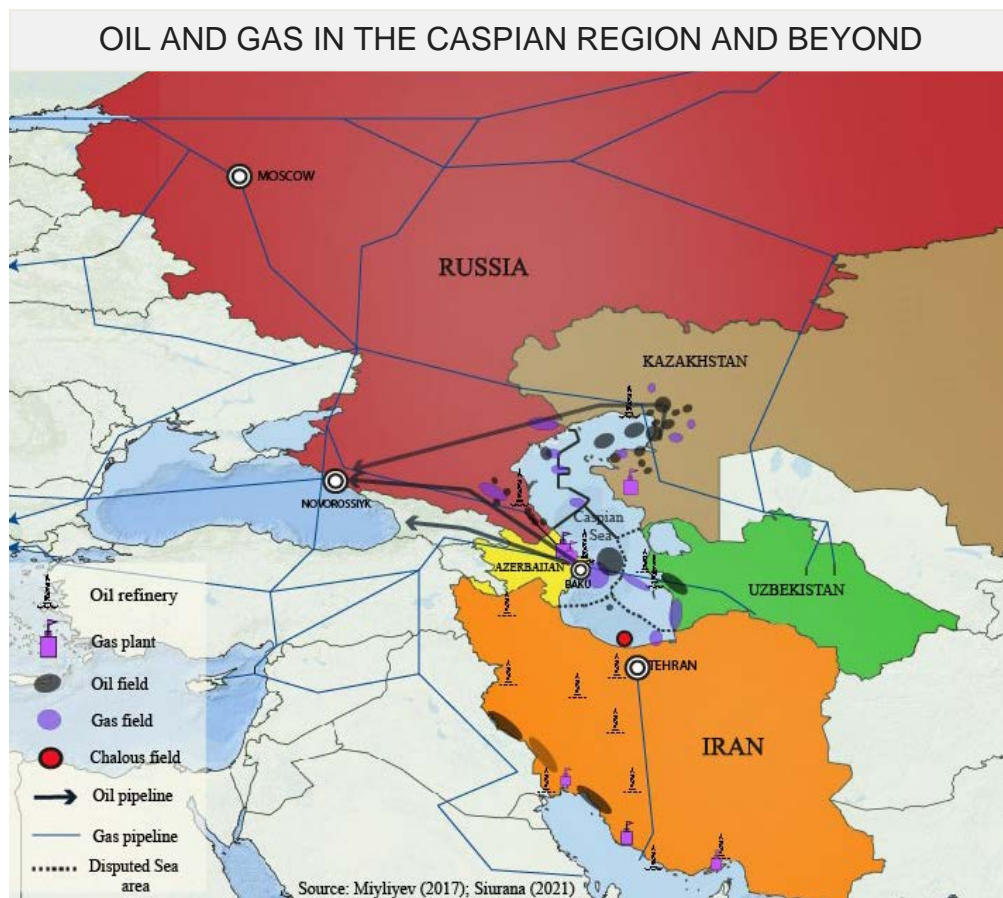
---

<sup>17</sup> SZALAY, Jessie, "Caspian Sea: Largest Inland Body of Water", *Live Science*, 2017, available at <https://www.livescience.com/57999-caspian-sea-facts.html>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, President of Russia, August 12, 2018, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5328>.

<sup>19</sup> TASS, "Iran working on issue of ratification of Caspian Convention, Ambassador to Russia says", 2021, available at <https://tass.com/world/1324363>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].

<sup>20</sup> Iran International, "Russia Demands Iran Ratify Caspian Sea Legal Convention", 2021, available at <https://old.iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/russia-demands-iran-ratify-caspian-sea-legal-convention>. [Accessed 20 January 2022].



*Map 1: Oil and gas in the Caspian region and beyond. Self-elaboration.*

Besides all this, the past June, Iran discovered the Chalous gas field in the Caspian Sea, which has been estimated to be the 10<sup>th</sup> world's largest gas reserve<sup>21</sup>. In this context, Iran and Russia are in the process of signing a 20-year cooperation agreement that would divide the benefits from this field. More concretely, Tehran and Moscow have discussed that for 20 years, Russia's Gazprom and Transneft would take 40% of the output from the field, China's CNPC and CNOOC 28%, and Iran's Kepco 25%. In exchange, Iran would gain transportation services from Transneft, financing from CNPP and infrastructure and engineering from CNOOC, as well as more international support from Russia. Through this agreement Russia would secure its European market<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Tehran Times, "New gas reserve in Caspian Sea could make Iran a major supplier to Europe", 2021, available at <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/464213/New-gas-reserve-in-Caspian-Sea-could-make-Iran-a-major-supplier>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].

<sup>22</sup> Iran International, "Iran's Caspian Gas Field, And Russia's Share, 'Far Bigger Than Expected'", 2021, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211116106809>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].



## Geopolitical interests: Russia and Iran within the Middle East

The Middle East has been found to be a very interesting region where Russia and Iran have common and diverging geopolitical interests. On the one hand, they (together with Turkey) have supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad against the opposition in Syria, although having different reasons for doing so. On the other hand, some divergences have been found in their relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Countries. The following subsections show the main geopolitical dynamics between these countries.

### *Russia-Turkey-Iran*

The relations between Russia, Turkey and Iran are characterized by cooperation in those matters where they have common interests, but without a further commitment to an alliance.

Until the fall of the Soviet Union, the relations between Russia and Turkey were conflictive. However, since the 1990s, their economic relations grew, despite their geopolitical rivalry in different regional conflicts. Moreover, since the 2000s, both countries have followed similar political paths. First, trying to become closer with the West, and then, after being unsuccessful, shifting to more authoritarian domestic leaderships and towards the East <sup>23</sup>.

What is more, the Russian-Turkish relations went a step higher in two different moments: first, when they, together with Iran, agreed on a common approach to Syria. And second, when Russia delivered to Turkey the S-400 air defense system in 2019.

In the beginning of the Syrian war, Turkey was interested in being seen as an intermediary of the conflict. However, it later started providing support to various Sunni Islamic groups belonging to the opposition against the Assad regime. Then, in 2016, after trilateral negotiations, Turkey started supporting Assad, the leader of the Shias<sup>24</sup>. What is more,

---

<sup>23</sup> RUMER, Eugene, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of all Trades, Master of None". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Return of Global Russia, 2019, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/WP-Rumer-MiddleEast.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> TOL, Gönül, "From regime change to rapprochement? Turkey's shifting Syria policy", Middle East Institute (MEI), 2019, available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/regime-change-rapprochement-turkeys-shifting-syria-policy>. [Accessed 17 January 2022].

the Kurds were gaining ground in Syria, and in 2015, the increasing Syrian refugees in Turkey had become a domestic problem<sup>25</sup>.

Overall, Moscow has used its relations with the Kurds as a power tool to force Turkey to support the government of Assad, as well as to keep them away from the US. In this respect, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have agreed to reject any Kurdish separatist ambitions and support Syria's territorial integrity<sup>26</sup>. For Russia, recognizing their self-determination would be harmful for its domestic politics, as it has its own internal separatist conflicts.

With respect to the Russian-Iranian relations, their common involvement in the Syrian war has been one of the main reasons for their increased cooperation. However, once the government of Assad has been reassured, Russia and Iran diverge on the future of Syria. On the one hand, Russia wants to maintain the status quo, as it is interested in a reconstructed and peaceful Syria. For Russia, achieving stability in the Middle East is essential for its domestic economic and political purposes. On the other hand, Iran's aims are rather revolutionary, as Syria is seen as a useful scenario for its strategies against Israel, and the Sunnis<sup>27</sup>.

Finally, in the recent years, Iran and Turkey have had close economic and political relations. First, they have cooperated in Syria. Second, both have been resisting any Western influence, fearing that the closer cooperation between the Gulf states and the US could go against them and the political Islam. And last, Turkey and Iran have, accordingly, the largest and second-largest Kurdish communities. In this context, any development in this matter, such as the 2017 KRI referendum of independence, has brought them closer<sup>28</sup>.

Overall, Turkey is among both Russia's and Iran's main trading partners. Although they have different regional interests, their convergence in key things has made their cooperation crucial for the achievement of their individual goals.

---

<sup>25</sup> SÖKMEN, Melike Janine, MARTÍNEZ, Irene and DE PEDRO, Nicolás, "Russia, Iran and Turkey, a common strategy in Syria?", CIDOB), 196, 2018, available at [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionales/n1\\_196/russia\\_iran\\_and\\_turkey\\_a\\_common\\_strategy\\_in\\_syria](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_196/russia_iran_and_turkey_a_common_strategy_in_syria).

<sup>26</sup> The Arab Weekly, "Russia, Turkey up pressure on Kurds to engage with Damascus", 2021, available at <https://the arabweekly.com/russia-turkey-pressure-kurds-engage-damascus>. [Accessed 17 January 2022].

<sup>27</sup> RUMER, op.cit., 2019.

<sup>28</sup> DALAY, Galip, "Turkish-Iranian Relations Are Set to Become More Turbulent", The German Marshall Fund, 2021, available at <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkish-iranian-relations-are-set-become-more-turbulent>. [Accessed 17 January 2022].

### ***Russia-Israel-Iran***

During the past years, the Russian-Israeli relations have substantially changed, mainly because of the personal diplomacy between Putin and the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. For years, the Jewish state had a difficult relationship with the USSR, from where many Jews have fled. Until 1991, the Soviet Union supported Israel's Arab enemies, Syria and Egypt, through the supply of weapons. It was in the 2000s when their relations started to improve<sup>29</sup>.

The main motivations for cooperating can be summarized as the following. On the one hand, it is in Israel's interest to prevent Russia from sharing military technology with Iran, Iraq, and other rival countries, as well as to ensure the rights of all Jews living in Russia or wanting to leave the country. Besides, Russia presents as a major power to contact with, to avoid international isolation. On the other hand, Israel is seen as a powerful international actor. In fact, approaching to a US ally could help to improve the latter's image of Russia. Additionally, Israeli leaders have been tolerant with Putin's strategies in Chechnya, accounting for their own hardline approach to the Palestinian militias<sup>30</sup>.

Having said all the above, Russia's involvement in Syria led to an improvement of its relations with Israel, while it became the most problematic issue in their cooperation. The main reason it being Russia's cooperation with Iran, a major rival of Israel. Although Israel's official position in the Syrian war is of neutrality, it has become involved, both militarily and politically, to avoid Iran from gaining power in Syria. Moreover, the Russian sales of Air Force technology to both Syria and Iran are deemed very negatively by Israel. In some cases, the two countries have managed to deal with these frictions. For instance, Russia has sometimes avoided to condemn Israel's strikes against Iranian positions in Syria and has rejected to sell the S-400 air defense system to Iran. Likewise, on some occasions, Israel has contended itself from condemning Iran's presence in Syria<sup>31</sup>.

In addition to this, Russia has shown a growing interest in increasing its relations with Lebanon, not only because it has access to the Mediterranean Sea, but also because of a recent discovery of big sub-sea gas fields in the Levant Basin, situated in Lebanese and Israeli waters. Besides, the Lebanese military group Hezbollah, is part of the Axis of

---

<sup>29</sup> RUMER, op.cit., 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

Resistance, together with Iran and the Syrian government. This axis is a political and military alliance against the West, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. For Russia, cooperating with the members of the axis can be very beneficial. In fact, it has recently held talks with Hezbollah<sup>32</sup>. However, Russia's increasing relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia necessarily put limits to its commitments with the Axis of resistance.

Overall, Russian-Israel relations are very complex. Israel's campaign against Iran in Syria compromises Russia's reconstruction mission there, as well as its cooperation with Iran. Nonetheless, Israel and Russia agree in the fact that they don't want Iran to gain power in Syria. In the context of Israel's new-elected Prime Minister, Bennett, the two countries have reassured their personal connection and their desire to maintain their cooperation<sup>33</sup>.

### ***Russia-Saudi Arabia-Iran***

Like Turkey and Israel, Saudi Arabia also felt obliged to upgrade its relations with Russia after its intervention in Syria. Having sided with the opposition in Syria, Russia's support of the government of Assad was considered by Saudi Arabia as a dangerous development in the region. What is more, this intervention was carried out in cooperation with Iran, Saudi Arabia's greatest rival in the Persian Gulf. In this sense, by improving its relations with Russia, Saudi Arabia aimed that the latter would contain Iran's influence in Syria and question its own relations with Iran<sup>34</sup>.

Additionally, the US, a long-time exclusive partner of Saudi Arabia, played a crucial role in the development of Russian-Saudi relations. First, its emergence as a major oil exporter (i.e., the US Shale revolution) created the need of coordination between the main regional producers. This coordination started in 2016 and it continued in 2020, in the context of the OPEC + agreement to lower the production due to the pandemic<sup>35</sup>. And

---

<sup>32</sup> KHURRAM, Abdullah, "The Growing Russian Interest in Lebanon", Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2021, available at <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-growing-russian-interest-in-lebanon/> [Accessed 23 January 2022].

<sup>33</sup> CZERNY, Milan, "Russia-Israel relations after the fall of Netanyahu", Riddle, 2021, available at <https://www.ridl.io/en/russia-israel-relations-after-the-fall-of-netanyahu/>.

BERMAN, Lazar, "Putin will maintain ties with Israel, as well as its enemies", The Times of Israel, 2021, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-will-maintain-ties-with-israel-as-well-as-its-enemies/>. [Accessed 7 January 2022].

<sup>34</sup> RUMER, op.cit., 2019.

<sup>35</sup> TRICKETT, Nicholas, "Shale to the Chief: Russia and Saudi Arabia's Great Oil Game", The Diplomat, 2018, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/shale-to-the-chief-russia-and-saudi-arabias-great-oil-game/>. [Accessed 18 January 2022].

second, the US' abandonment of the Middle East, a transition process that started under Trumps' presidency and that Biden is yet completing, has made it convenient for Saudi Arabia to diversify its relations and get closer to Russia, a growing regional power. In fact, in 2021, they announced an agreement to cooperate militarily<sup>36</sup>.

With respect to the Iranian-Saudi bilateral relations, their diplomatic relations were broken in 2016, due to the execution of a Shiite Muslim cleric by Saudi Arabia, which is a conservative Sunni absolute monarchy. In this sense, the two countries compete for the leadership of both the Islamic world and oil exports. Besides, while Saudi Arabia has always been allied to the US, Iran's alliance with the latter ended with the Islamic Revolution. Consequently, Iran and Saudi Arabia have taken opposite sides in every regional matter, such as the wars in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon.

Despite all of this, in 2021, they met several times, signaling a possible rapprochement. For Iran, relations with Saudi Arabia, the second-largest Arab economy, could help to broaden its regional trade, sending a powerful message to the region. In the case of Saudi Arabia, reducing tensions with Iran would facilitate the end of the Yemeni war, a conflict through which Iran and the Saudis have fought against each other for years<sup>37</sup>. With Biden's announcement that it will cease its support to Saudis' side in Yemen, they have lost any chance of winning the war and want it to be over as soon as possible<sup>38</sup>. In this context, Saudi Arabia has made some moves that Iran has positively welcomed, such as its involvement in the establishment of the Syrian government in the Arab League. Besides, in opposition to what other Arab countries have done, Saudi Arabia has not formalized its relations with Israel<sup>39</sup>.

Apart from Saudi Arabia, Russia has also improved its relations with other countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The reasons for these changes are the same that in the case of Saudi Arabia: their common energy interests; Russia's increased

---

KUTLU, Övünç, "Saudi, Russia agree on further oil output coordination". Anadolu Agency, 2020, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/oil/saudi-russia-agree-on-further-oil-output-coordination/29405>. [Accessed 18 January 2022].

<sup>36</sup> HAFIDI, Meryem, "Russia's new geopolitics in the Middle East", Atalayar, 2021, available at <https://atalayar.com/en/content/russias-new-geopolitics-middle-east>. [Accessed 18 January 2022].

<sup>37</sup> HOLLEIS, Jennifer. "Why Saudi-Iran relations are thawing — for now", Deutsche Welle, 2021, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/why-saudi-iran-relations-are-thawing-for-now/a-59508071>.

<sup>38</sup> HODALI, Diana, "Saudi Arabia has lost the war in Yemen", Deutsche Welle, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-has-lost-the-war-in-yemen/a-57007568>.

<sup>39</sup> HOLLEIS, op.cit, 2021.

engagement in the Middle East; the challenge of Iran and its relations with Russia; and the US' progressive withdrawal from the region<sup>40</sup>. In addition to this, the Gulf states are interested in building better relations with Iran, as it makes the end of the Yemeni war more likely. In Syria, Oman, Bahrain and the UAE have already reestablished their embassies. This helps to legitimize the government of Assad, a gesture that Russia and Iran will surely appreciate<sup>41</sup>.

## Conclusions

Overall, this analysis has yielded the following three results. First, that the evolution of the Russian-Iranian economic relations were slow, although having increased their cooperation within Eurasia. Second, that they have not developed a solid alliance because, although they have common geoeconomic interests, especially in the energy sector, they have conflicting geopolitical interests in the Middle East. And third, that external powers may play a very important role in a region's dynamics, as Russia and the US have in the Middle East.

Knowing all of this, three main conclusions can be drawn. First, that Russian-Iranian relations are going to remain strategic for their pursue of regional influence within Eurasia. Here, several factors are going to play a role, such as the evolution of the War in Ukraine, the nuclear talks, their regional cooperation, their common concern about Afghanistan and their continuous rejection of the US' supremacy.

Second, that Russia's pragmatism can be found in its foreign policy to other countries. For instance, Russia's cooperation with China has been purely pragmatic. Among their common points, both resent the US-domination and maintain a neutral position concerning the other's role in territorial disputes, such as Ukraine or the South China Sea. Besides, they have cooperated in projects that yield benefits for both. Nonetheless, Russia's cooperation with China also has its limits as they are competitors within the region of Central Asia.

Another example of Russia's pragmatism can be observed in its recent relations with the

---

<sup>40</sup> RUMER, op.cit., 2019.

<sup>41</sup> BAR'EL, Zvi, "The Middle East Seeks Alternatives as the U.S. Leaves and Iran Returns", Haaretz, 2021, Available at <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/premium-the-middle-east-seeks-alternatives-as-the-u-s-leaves-and-iran-returns-1.10506410>.

African continent. Differentiating itself from China and the EU, Russia has approached the continent without agreeing to provide aid programs. On the one hand, African countries blame Western sanctions for hindering their trade with Russia. On the other hand, they are attracted by Russia's defense of self-determination, hoping to build satisfactory systems without necessarily complying with Western standards.

Lastly, my third conclusion is that accounting for geopolitics and geoeconomics is essential when analyzing the behavior of a country and its relations with others. The case of Russia is a particularly good example that interests run the world. Both Russia and Iran have found their cooperation as an opportunity to counterbalance their sanctions from the West. However, Russia has also found it attractive to cooperate with other countries within the Middle East, which happen to be rivals of Iran. Overall, Russia has noticeably clear domestic objectives that lead it to a very pragmatic foreign agenda.

*María Ballesteros Miguel\**

Graduate in International Studies

Postgraduate in Geopolitics and Strategic Studies

[@98mariba](#)