

Defying America. Russia's policy towards Iran

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Russia's relations with Iran are almost entirely based on geopolitical considerations. The Russian elite perceives Iran as an essential, albeit difficult partner, with whom it shares a number of interests; a partner who understands the language of power politics, and has demonstrated a willingness to seek pragmatic compromises where the interests of Moscow and Tehran diverge. The foundation of the Russian-Iranian strategic partnership is both countries' common interest in reducing American power and influence, both in the Middle East and globally. The partnership with Iran is also important for Russia because it helps to stabilise the geopolitical situation in the south of the post-Soviet area (the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia) and minimise the influence of Western countries in the region. Since the Russian Federation began its military intervention in Syria (September 2015), Iran has become its *de facto* ally in its war against the armed anti-Assad opposition. Since the United States withdrew from the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) in 2018, Russia has become a major advocate of maintaining it, and has undertaken active diplomatic efforts to persuade its Western European signatories to resume economic relations with Iran – in defiance of the American sanctions. In response to the escalation in the conflict between Iran and the United States and its Arab allies in summer 2019, Russia has provided diplomatic and propaganda support for Iran. It has also undertaken initiatives aimed at easing tensions in the region and creating a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf, based on the logic of a concert of powers and limiting the importance of bilateral relations in the security sphere between the US and the region's Arab monarchies.

Relations with Iran in the context of relations with the United States

Russia's 'strategic partnership' with Iran is mainly based on the common interest Moscow and Tehran have in curbing the power of the US; for its part, Tehran is primarily interested in its regional dimension, while Moscow also sees the matter from a global perspective. According to Vladimir Sazhin, one of Russia's leading experts on Iran, what is most important from the point of view

of Moscow's interests is that "Tehran's policy is largely anti-Western, both in its global and regional aspect."¹

It is essential to Moscow's interests to maintain Iran's role as an anti-American buffer on its southern borders. Hence, it is interested in the failure

¹ *Партнерство России и Ирана: текущее состояние и перспективы развития*, РСМД and IRAS, Moscow 2017, p. 22, www.russiancouncil.ru.



of attempts Washington has made to bring about domestic political change in Iran, and in limiting the effectiveness of US economic sanctions. From the Russian point of view, Iran is a regional power that has a natural right to build a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood. This approach can be seen in Vladimir Putin's words in reaction to accusations by Iran's Arab neighbours that it has been conducting expansionist policies in the region; "a major power (Rus. *крупной державы*) such as Iran, which has been located on this territory for millennia – the Iranians, the Persians have lived here for centuries – is bound to have its own interests [here], and it is necessary to treat [those interests] respectfully"². The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has also repeatedly expressed similar views.

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From this perspective, Iran is an important partner for Russia in building a multipolar order, both at the regional (Middle East) and global levels. One manifestation of this is Russia's consistent support (more or less since 2015) for Iran's candidacy for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (since 2005 it has had observer status, and in 2008 it submitted an application for membership)³.

During the 1990s and the first decade of this century, Moscow approached its relations with Iran in instrumental terms, subordinating them to its relations with the United States. Russia used the relationship with Iran to strengthen its bargaining position with the US, making the extent of its cooperation with Tehran (especially in matters of nuclear technologies and supply of military equipment) conditional on Washington's

willingness to take Russian interests into account. The most glaring manifestation of this instrumental approach was Moscow's support for the UN Security Council sanctions against Iran in 2010, as well as its cancellation of deliveries to Iran of technologically advanced (and already partially paid) S-300 air defence system. In this manner Moscow reciprocated the steps which the Obama administration undertook as part of the 'reset' policy with Russia (particularly the cancellation of the deployment of the US anti-missile defence system in Central Europe, and the signing of a new START treaty, which was essential for Russia maintaining its strategic parity with the United States).

While in Tehran the memory of this transaction (made at Iran's expense) continues to cast a shadow over its relations with Russia, there is no sign that Moscow is currently trying to play a similar game. This is because – from the Kremlin's point of view – the geopolitical context of its relations with Iran has fundamentally changed: the relationship with the United States has taken on the character of a deep and fundamental conflict, China has become Moscow's main partner in global politics, and the position of Russia itself in the Middle East is, in some respects, incomparably stronger than it was in 2010. Importantly, Iran has become Russia's essential partner in Syria.

Meanwhile, the idea that Russia can be induced to put pressure on Iran in exchange for the lifting of US sanctions (against Russia and Iran) is still alive in Israel⁴. The trilateral meeting in Jerusalem of the heads of the Security Councils of Israel (Meir Ben-Shabat), Russia (Nikolai Patrushev) and the United States (John Bolton), which Israel organised in June 2019, was an attempt to take a step in that direction; however, it ended in complete failure. Patrushev declared outright that "Iran was and remains our ally and partner" and "therefore, any attempt to present Tehran as the main threat to regional security, and more so, to group it together with ISIS and other terrorist groups, are unacceptable for us", and that "Russia will

² 'Интервью телеканалам Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia и RT Arabic', Президент России, 13 October 2019, www.kremlin.ru.

³ Prior to 2015, the UN sanctions imposed on Iran constituted a formal obstacle; Iran's entry is currently being blocked by Tajikistan.

⁴ See 'Strategic Survey for Israel 2019-2020', *The Institute for National Security Studies*, January 2020, p. 35

take the interests of Iran into account [during the meeting]”⁵.

Pragmatic coexistence in the post-Soviet area

For Russia, an important element of its ‘strategic partnership’ with Iran is the latter’s policy in the post-Soviet area, where Tehran has not only avoided rivalry with Moscow, but has loyally worked with it (*vide* its support for the pro-Russian governments of Tajikistan and Armenia, and its distancing itself from Chechen separatism). Iran’s image in Moscow was defined by its willingness to cooperate with Russia in the 1990s in solving the internal conflict in Tajikistan on Russia’s conditions. Tehran did not unconditionally support the armed Islamic opposition at that time, but persuaded it to lay down its arms and accept the Peace Agreement in 1997, which reduced it to the role of junior partner in the government dominated by the Moscow-backed President Imamali Rahman⁶.

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A leading Russian expert on affairs in the region, Irina Zviagelskaya, estimates that Iran has always “acted politically in a virtually unobjectionable manner” in Central Asia and “does not aspire to leadership”, and its policies “can be considered completely acceptable”⁷. The fact that Moscow assesses Tehran as a constructive partner in the CIS region is also confirmed by its willingness to develop a trilateral format of cooperation between Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan.

⁵ ‘Патрушев: на встрече в Иерусалиме Россия будет учитывать интересы Ирана’, РИА Новости, 20 June 2019, www.ria.ru; ‘Патрушев заявил, что попытки поставить Иран в один ряд с ИГИЛ неприемлемы для России’, ТАСС, 25 June 2019, www.tass.ru.

⁶ Russian officials often mention the positive role Iran played in resolving the Tajik conflict. For example, see this interview with Foreign Minister S. Lavrov, ‘Войну мы не начнем, это я вам обещаю’, *Коммерсантъ* No. 175, 26 September 2019: www.kommersant.ru.

⁷ И. Звягельская, ‘В поисках точки опоры: Иран в центральной Азии’, РСМД, 12 November 2014, www.russiancouncil.ru.

The Syrian context of the Moscow’s relationship with Tehran

The rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran over the Syrian issue began to take shape back in 2011 due to their converging assessments of the Arab Spring. Both saw it as a US-inspired phenomenon, which posed a potential threat to both their own internal stability and their geopolitical positions in the Middle East. Both feared that the Arab Spring could lead to a strengthening of the United States in the region or the activation of radical Sunni movements. For Iran, the latter would also entail the strengthening of Saudi Arabia, its main geopolitical rival in the region.

An important turning point in the development of Russian-Iranian relations was September 2015, when Russia launched its direct military intervention in Syria in order to salvage the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which was trying to suppress a military uprising backed by the Sunni kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates), Turkey and the United States.

With Russia becoming militarily involved on the side of Assad, Moscow and Tehran became *de facto* allies in the war, which apart from being a Syrian internal conflict also had a regional and global dimension, with foreign powers supporting the different sides.

The Russian intervention was preceded by at least several months of military consultations with Iran, which in July 2015 brought to Moscow General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the elite unit of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who was in charge of coordinating Iran’s military support for the Assad regime. The two countries’ joint conduct of the war necessarily entailed deepening of the military cooperation between them (the coordination of military operations). This coordination resulted in a kind of division of labour: Russia provided air support, and Iran delivered ground forces in the form of Shiite militias and personnel from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This division of labour, on the one hand, allowed Russia to avoid significant losses (evidently

important for the Kremlin, which was mindful of the reaction from the Russian public), but on the other made it dependent on Iran (and vice versa). Overcoming the anti-Assad opposition on the battlefield required the participation of both Russian aircraft and of the militias controlled by Iran (these are now more numerous than the Syrian government army). The relative importance of the latter is increasing together with the end of the fighting: their job no longer involves breaking up the armed opposition's compact formations, but rather maintaining control over the territory they have taken.

Relations with Iran in the context of Russia's policy in the Middle East

The political relations between Russia and Iran are an intertwined nexus of both common and divergent interests. At present the common interests seem to be prevailing, at least from Moscow's point of view. Russia and Iran have converging interests in limiting the presence and influence of the United States in the region, as well as in bringing about the final victory of Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war and in legitimising his regime in the international arena. However, even in Syria the Iranian-Russian alliance is not devoid of elements of competition, in terms of influence over the Assad regime and of various tactical differences. Ultimately, however, both sides seem to assume that they are bound to cooperate in Syria.

What complicates Russian-Iranian relations are the relationships with the remaining major actors on the Middle Eastern political scene. Iran is in an acute conflict with Israel, with huge stakes for both sides. This conflict has in fact become an undeclared low-intensity war currently being waged on the territory of Syria. Iran is also engaged in a sharp ideological and geopolitical rivalry with Saudi Arabia, which for its part enjoys the backing of the majority of Sunni monarchies in the Persian Gulf. Russia, for its part, is interested in maintaining good relations with Israel and in tightening its relations with Saudi Arabia. Generally speaking, Russia has attempted to nurture good relations

with all the major actors in the region while simultaneously remaining neutral in the conflicts and disputes that divide them (with the obvious exception of the Syrian conflict). Russia has openly stated that it is not a party to the Shia-Sunni rivalry, and has called on the representatives of the two branches of Islam to engage in dialogue and seek a peaceful *modus vivendi*. Similarly, it has distanced itself from the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Persian Gulf, and called on the two sides to alleviate the tension by creating a regional dialogue mechanism including all the interested parties.

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Russia took a similarly neutral stand regarding the war between Israel and Iran. In the autumn of 2015, after the launch of its military intervention in Syria, Russia accepted the Israeli proposal to create a mechanism for preventing incidents between the armed forces of the two states in Syria. This enabled the Israeli air force to strike Iranian targets in Syria without the risk that it might itself become a target for Russian air defence systems deployed in Syria. The Russian side, for its part, tried to take into account Israel's demands to restrict the presence of Iranian forces and pro-Iranian militias in the part of Syria which is adjacent to Israel. In summer 2017, when Russia supported the offensive by Syrian government troops against the anti-Assad opposition forces controlling the area, it assured Israel that in the cross-border zone (which, according to several media reports, included a strip of land along the Israeli-Syrian border reaching 50–85 km). However, according to Israeli media, this promise has not been fully kept.

Although on the one hand Russia tolerates the strikes carried out by the Israeli air force in Syria, on the other it is evidently limiting their room for manoeuvre. This was particularly evident when in September 2018, during an Israeli air strike, the Syrian anti-aircraft defence mistakenly shot down

a Russian military plane. The Russian side blamed Israel for the incident, called on Israel to limit the number of strikes and offered Syria a relatively advanced anti-aircraft defence system S-300 (the delivery of which it had previously suspended to satisfy Israel's demands). Consequently, as an Israeli daily stated in January 2020, "it is plain to see that Israel has reduced its military activity in Syria"⁸.

For Russia's relations with Iran, the Turkish context is also significant. A trilateral consultation mechanism between Russia, Iran and Turkey has been in place since 2016 with the aim of coordinating and harmonising their actions in Syria (where all three have a military presence). Although Russia's objectives in Syria are aligned more with those of Iran than those of Turkey (Russia and Iran support Assad and his attempts to regain control of the Syrian territory as a whole, whereas Turkey is hostile towards Assad and would like to maintain a buffer zone in Syria that would be controlled by anti-Assad units), in certain situations Russia has cooperated with Turkey against Iran. This happened for example in the case of the evacuation of opposition forces from Aleppo and the creation of a Turkish-controlled buffer zone in the Idlib province. However, since Russia renewed its offensive in Idlib in December 2019 (on the pretext of Ankara failing to deliver on its promise to disarm the radical Islamist groups), it has cooperated not only with the Syrian army, but also with the pro-Iranian Shiite militias.

Russia and the Iranian nuclear dossier

Russia is not interested in Iran's development of nuclear weapons, but at the same time it is not ready to sacrifice its relations with Tehran to prevent it. It treats this issue instrumentally, on the assumption that Iran's development of nuclear weapons is unavoidable but still far in the future, and moreover, these weapons will pose no threat to Russia. Consequently, Moscow is using Iran's nuclear dossier to achieve goals which have no direct relationship to Iran's nucle-

ar programme. The most important of these at present is to demonstrate to the Iranian ruling class that Russia is a reliable partner, whose co-operation is indispensable for shielding Iran from American pressure. The Kremlin is thus hoping to erase Tehran's memory of the U-turn Russia made in 2010 by agreeing to the UN sanctions on Iran in exchange for the 'reset' with Washington.

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By defending the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA), Russia is portraying itself as the principled defender of international law and of the inviolability of the Security Council resolutions (the JCPOA was approved by UN Security Council Resolution no. 2231 of 15 July 2015). In addition, Russian diplomacy is trying to use the issue of the agreement as another opportunity to build a common front with major Western European states against Washington. Therefore, after the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, Russia presented itself as an essential supporter of its continued observance, and sharply criticised Washington for withdrawing from the agreement. At the same time Russia expressed understanding for Iran's reaction (as it gradually shed the restrictions the JCPOA imposed on its nuclear programme), and sought to justify it. Moscow, like Tehran, has emphasised that the agreement remains valid as long as Iran does not formally withdraw from it and maintains the IAEA's inspection regime. Russia has also undertaken intensive diplomatic efforts to ensure that its European signatories (France, Germany, the United Kingdom) sustain the agreement. It has also called for the creation within the European Union of a mechanism for circumventing of the US economic sanctions imposed on Iran and declared its willingness to participate in it.

⁸ K. Svetlova, 'A turbulent decade sees Moscow's star shine brightly in the Middle East', *The Times of Israel*, 11 January 2020, www.timesofisrael.com.

Moscow did not hide its disappointment when it turned out that this mechanism (INSTEX), created in January 2019, would only apply to medicines and food, which are in any case not subject to US sanctions. From the Russian point of view, it was another sign that Europe is unwilling to pursue a foreign policy independent of Washington. Moscow took a similar view of the decision by three of the JCPOA's European signatories to initiate the 'dispute settlement' procedure provided for within the pact, in response to Iran's resumption of uranium enrichment (5 January). Moscow has criticised the EU's decision and has indicated that it will employ procedural legerdemain to block it. From Moscow's point of view, the danger of initiating this procedure lies in the fact that it opens up the possibility that UN sanctions could be resumed.

Russian-Iranian bilateral relations

Political relations

In the past six years there has been a marked intensification of Russian-Iranian political contacts. The leaders of the two countries, Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani, meet three or four times a year (they have met 17 times so far, including four in 2019). Putin has also met Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the spiritual leader of Iran, on three occasions (in 2015, 2017 and 2018). The fact that President Putin organised meetings at the Kremlin for Iran's Vice-President Ali Akbar Velayati (in 2015 and 2018) confirms that these relations are important for the Russian side. The foreign ministers also hold regular meetings (the head of Iranian diplomacy, Mohammad Javad Zarif, has visited Moscow as many as 27 times in the past six years), as do the secretaries of each country's security council and their heads of intelligence. Regular consultations between the foreign ministries at the deputy ministerial level are also held. Other high-ranking officials responsible for maintaining frequent contacts with Iranian diplomats include Mikhail Bogdanov, Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East, and Aleksandr Lavrentev, the Russian President's special envoy to Syria. In 2018 a joint committee for parliamentary cooperation was also set up.

Economic cooperation

Contrary to the declared intentions of both sides, and the multiple meetings of the two countries' economic ministers, economic cooperation between Russia and Iran still remains at a relatively low level. Moscow's hopes that Russian companies would be able to benefit from the absence of competition from Western businesses kept out by Western sanctions (which Russia did not recognise) and build up a strong position in the Iranian market turned out to be illusory. In reality, despite efforts and declarations, Tehran and Moscow did not manage to shield their economic relations from the impact of the Western sanctions policy. Neither the signature in November 2014 of a new contract to construct two more units at the Bushehr nuclear power plant, worth an estimated US\$10 billion, nor the Russian pledge in November 2015 to grant Iran a loan of €5 billion for the implementation of investments by Russian companies, have had much impact. As a consequence bilateral trade, which had been worth around US\$4 billion a year in the period between 2001–2010, shrank to a mere US\$1.2 billion in 2015.

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It was only after the Western sanctions were lifted in the aftermath of the entry into force, in January 2016, of the JCPOA that Russia and Iran were able to intensify their economic cooperation. Moscow and Tehran then signed a number of agreements, including on the mutual protection of investments, the avoidance of double taxation and the facilitation of customs and visa procedures (visas were abolished for organised tourist groups). In July 2016 Russia disbursed €2.2 billion (out of the €5 billion loan promised in 2015) to a subsidiary of the state company Rostech to build a power plant, and to the Russian Railways (RZhD) for the electrification of the Iranian railways.

These efforts bore fruit in the form of a rapid increase in the volume of trade, which rose by 85% in 2016 (this was particularly significant in the context of the overall shrinkage in Russia's trade in that period). However in 2017, total trade, and in particular Russian exports to Iran, plummeted again, and as a consequence the volume of trade fell by more than 20% (including Russian exports, which fell by more than 30%). In 2018 turnover remained at the same level (US\$1.7 billion), wherein Russian exports fell by another 10%, with imports from Iran increasing by over a third. The results of the first ten months of 2019 have shown a renewed upsurge in trade of 21%, this time exclusively thanks to Russian exports, which increased by almost a third. In total, the level of trade will reach no more than half the level of the 2000s. Consequently, whereas Iran's share in Russia's foreign trade amounted to 0.5% in 2013, in 2019 it stood at just 0.3%.

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The difficulties in developing economic cooperation are demonstrated by the fate of the idea of bartering Iranian oil for Russian industrial goods, which was intended as a tool to help Iran to break Western sanctions. In August 2014 the two countries signed the requisite memorandum, but it was only in May 2017 that Iran announced the conclusion of concrete transactions, the volume of which was nonetheless five times lower than had originally been envisaged (100,000 instead of 500,000 barrels of oil per month). According to Russia, the deliveries started in November 2017, were then quickly suspended, and resumed only in September 2018. However, the quantities involved are so negligible that they have no impact on the economic relations between the two countries.

Also, the fate of the initiative to establish a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union testifies to the difficulties in aligning

Russian and Iranian economic interests. Russia proposed a free trade zone back in 2014, but after two years of delays and a further two years of negotiations, only a temporary, partial agreement (covering only half of the goods traded) leading to a 'free trade zone' was signed in 2018. It came into force on 27 October 2019, and is valid for three years, during which the parties are to continue talks on setting up a fully-fledged free trade zone.

Military cooperation

Since the early 1990s Russia has been the main supplier of arms to Iran, providing it with a wide range of equipment: from tanks and armoured personnel carriers, through air defence systems (S-300, Tor), to combat aircraft and submarines. In 2010–15, exports of Russian arms to Iran were halted in connection with the United Nations' sanction regime. In particular, Russia suspended deliveries of the already contracted (and partially paid for) S-300 anti-aircraft system. However, military-technical cooperation did not stop entirely; Russia continued to supply equipment for electronic warfare, among other items. In connection with the partial lifting of UN sanctions in 2016, Russia fulfilled its contract to supply the S-300 systems. Now, in anticipation of the expiry in autumn 2020 of all the UN's remaining sanctions on arms exports to Iran, exploratory talks are being held on possible contracts worth US\$8 billion (for fighter aircraft, helicopters, missile systems, tanks and warships).

The year 2015 was a watershed moment for military cooperation between Russia and Iran; by intervening in the civil war in Syria on the side of President Assad, Russia became a *de facto* ally of Iran. This meant conducting combat operations in association with Shiite militias under Iranian leadership (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). This required Russia and Iran to develop contacts between the two countries' militaries and security services. In January 2015, defence ministers of the two states signed a cooperation agreement providing for joint exercises, contacts between command structures, as well as exchange of intelligence. Two shared centres for the exchange of military information and coordination

of operations were established in Baghdad and Damascus. Annual meetings between the two countries' defence ministers and heads of their general staffs became habitual. General Qasem Suleimani, commander of the special forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which coordinates Iran's military and special activity abroad (particularly in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon), visited Moscow at least twice (the visits were not officially confirmed) between 2015 and 2017. A special committee for military cooperation was also set up. The naval forces of the two states have carried out frequent joint exercises in the Caspian Sea, and Iranian officers began to receive invitations to Russian military exercises. One meaningful symbol of how close military relations between Russia and Iran was the consent issued by the Iranians in August 2016 for the Russian bombers to use the Hamadan air base in Iran to carry out bombings in Syria.

Russia on the rising tension in the Persian Gulf

In summer 2019, the conflict between Iran on one side and the United States and its Arab allies on the other hand escalated significantly. In April 2019 the US tightened its embargo on Iranian oil exports, which caused a reaction in the form of Iranian attacks on ships in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and on oil installations in Saudi Arabia. In December 2019, Iranian forces fired on US military bases in Iraq and pro-Iranian militias attacked the American embassy in Baghdad. The US responded with a rocket attack on pro-Iranian militia bases in Iraq, as well as a drone attack which killed General Suleimani, a key figure in the Iranian leadership who was responsible for Iran's policy of expansion in the Mashreq.

The Russian response was complex. First, Russia stepped up its cooperation with Iran in the military sphere. In July, during a visit by the Iranian fleet commander Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, a memorandum was signed between the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Iranian General Staff to further strengthen the two countries' military cooperation. In December 2019 Russian warships

undertook joint maritime exercises with the fleets of Iran and China in the northern part of the Indian Ocean, in the Gulf of Oman. Also in December, a meeting of the Russian-Iranian bilateral commission for military cooperation was held in Moscow; in turn, the Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev and the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin (both of whom are members of Putin's inner circle) visited Tehran.

Secondly, Russian diplomacy and propaganda consistently placed the blame for the rise in tension on the United States, and refused to attribute the responsibility for the Gulf incidents and the attacks on Saudi Arabia to Iran.

Thirdly, under the guise of playing a neutral role, Russia tried to hinder the US in mobilising and consolidating its allies in the region. Elements of this included Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia (October 2019), as well as the Russian collective security concept announced in July; this involved tempting the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf with the mirage of guaranteeing their own security 'together with' Iran (as well as Russia and China, who supported this initiative) and not 'against' Iran, relying on the United States. It was no coincidence that the Russian initiative coincided with the American attempt to devise a multilateral initiative to ensure the safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

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Fourth, after the death of General Suleimani, when the risk of open armed conflict between Iran and the United States was at its greatest, Moscow – although it strongly condemned the US attack and deemed it an unprecedented violation of international law – clearly worked to calm down the tensions and reduce the risk of escalation. This was reflected even in the specific phraseology which the Russian Defence Ministry used, as it reported the telephone consultations (conducted three days

after the attack) between the Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu and the head of the Iranian General Staff; supposedly their aim was to take “practical steps to prevent the escalation of the situation in Syria and the Middle East.”

What can we expect from Russia’s policy towards Iran?

In a situation of continued major tension in Russia’s relations with the United States and persistent differences between Russia and the European Union, Moscow will continue to seek to maintain and strengthen its relations with Iran. This is based on the assumption that the survival of Iran, as it conducts its anti-American policy, is in Russia’s fundamental interest.

In the current situation there is no chance that Moscow will revert to its policy of the years 2008–10, which involved its deliberate distancing from Iran in order to improve relations with the US (the ‘reset’). Likewise, we should not expect Russia to try and revise the existing division of influence in Syria in its favour. On the contrary, in a situation of rising tensions with Turkey – in both Syria and Libya – Moscow is bound to strengthen its cooperation with Tehran. The two countries’ further rapprochement will also be influenced by the situation in Afghanistan, where they are interested in minimising the US presence, and are ready to hold talks and make deals with the Taliban. Generally, Russia will continue to treat Iran as its strategic partner because there is more that unites the two countries than divides them.