



Rethinking The Russo-Iranian Entente

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Just how solid is the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran?

For years, policymakers in Washington and regional capitals have speculated about whether it might be possible to sever the long-standing strategic ties between Moscow and Tehran. And, via a range of strategic issues, successive American administrations have tried to do just that.

During the George W. Bush era, the United States attempted repeatedly to enlist Moscow's assistance against Tehran as part of its broad-based "war on terror." Subsequently, the Obama White House tried a different tack, seeking to rehabilitate Iran through international negotiations over its nuclear program (which, in turn, would have helped dilute Russian influence over the Islamic Republic). And in its early days, the Trump administration toyed with the notion of driving a wedge between the two countries by giving Russian President Vladimir Putin a freer hand in Syria.

None of these overtures amounted to much. Initially forged during the Cold War, bilateral ties between Moscow and Tehran have flourished over the past quarter-century on the basis of arms (and nuclear) sales, shared worries about Sunni *jihadism* and a common, pervasive sense of anti-Americanism. These bonds have made the Russo-Iranian entente mutually beneficial for both countries – and remarkably resilient to outside pressure, especially while the Kremlin played only a limited role in the Middle East.

But now, Russia is expanding its equities in the region.

Since 2015, Moscow has dramatically broadened its footprint in the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its ongoing military campaign in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. It is also actively deepening its investments in the Gulf and North Africa. Last month, Russia and Egypt inked a new strategic partnership treaty under which the Kremlin will provide billions of dollars of new arms to the government of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Energy ties between Russia and the region are also expanding following a meeting this summer between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman at which the two pledged to more closely coordinate the production of oil and natural gas.

Russia has even begun to establish a military presence in North Africa. Last month, news broke that Moscow had set up two separate military bases in Libya, and was deploying troops to the war-torn country in support of warlord Khalifa Haftar and his military faction. Western intelligence officials now believe that the Putin government sees Libya as "a new Syria," and is therefore creating the capacity to shape events there.

All of which is prompting a recalibration of sorts in the Russo-Iranian entente.

At the most recent Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate earlier this month, one of Russia's leading foreign policy scholars gave what is perhaps the clearest description to date of Moscow's changing calculus in its relations with Tehran. According to Oxana Gaman-Golutvina of the prestigious Moscow State Institute for International Relations, the Kremlin is now seeking to balance its longstanding Shi'ite-centric policy in the Middle East with greater outreach toward the Sunni states of the Gulf and Levant. The Kremlin, she noted, has become convinced that doing so is essential to becoming a key strategic player in one of the world's most important regions.

None of this means Russia is ready to abandon its ties to Iran. After all, the strategic partnership between the two countries has endured for so long precisely because it continues to benefit both Moscow and Tehran. That is why, as Kremlin officials have made clear in recent days, Russia remains committed to economic and political cooperation with Iran despite the re-imposition of sweeping sanctions by the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, Russia's expanding interests in the Middle East mean that, more and more, it will need to balance between Iran and its new regional partners. And that, in turn, could give those countries greater leverage than ever before over the previously-unassailable Russo-Iranian alliance.

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