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THE RUSSIA-IRAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF UKRAINE'S WAR



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Introduction

Closer ties between Putin's Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the field of security cooperation (voennoe sotrudничество) has attracted significant attention from Western foreign policy-makers and academic scholars in recent years. Diplomatic isolation and commonly shared dissatisfaction with the long-established American hegemony has driven both countries into a pragmatic, stable and mutually beneficial rapprochement nearly a decade after a new chapter in their relationships was opened in 2012 (Ghadbeigy, 2017). By this time the return of Vladimir Putin to power was clearly interpreted as marking a watershed moment in Russian foreign policy doctrine and strategies that had long since been in vogue under the rule of Dmitriy Medvedev (Kozhanov, 2015). Looking for a circle of like-minded and loyal allies willing to undermine the post-1991 international order, Moscow made a priority of bringing itself closer to its Eurasian 'old traditional partner' [FT1] in the heated context of the Syrian civil war and the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Grajewski, 2019). There is no doubt that Putin's regular meetings on the margins of the SCO with former leaders Ahmadinejad and Rouhani took a decisive turn when a hallmark agreement on the export of S-300 missiles was eventually sealed (Sadegi, 2022). No sooner had the deal been honoured in November 2016 than Russia planned delivering to its ally a \$10 billion package of aircrafts, helicopters and rocket systems. Yet, despite successive years of cordial relationship with Israel's PM Netanyahu, Moscow kept turning a deaf ear to the pressing exhortations from Jerusalem that such agreements be either suspended or promptly terminated amidst fears of Iran's military expansionism[FT2] (Burgos, 2018). More than half a decade later, military cooperation between Iran and Russia has reached new heights since the so-called 'special military operation' (специальная военная операция) was launched by the Russian President in person on February 24th, 2022. As Russian troops have recently suffered a chain of crushing defeats on the Donetsk frontline following the Ukrainian counteroffensive of August 2022, Moscow has been forced to face the dismal reality of its badly equipped, ill-prepared ground forces on the battlefield. This must also be combined with the stark observation that Russia's pyrrhic victories in the early phases of the conflict had reportedly been achieved with largely unanticipated tactical mistakes and a colossal death toll, in part due to the serious issue of its ageing weapons and obsolete vehicles. It seems that, just as Russia began showing signs of moral fatigue in the face of Ukrainian troops emboldened with Western-supplied arms, its alliance with Iran has come into play.

Russia-Iran Military Cooperation in the Ukrainian War: Russia's Use of Iranian Combat Drones

The deployment of Iranian-made Shahed-129 drones by the Russian military has borne witness to Russia's profound determination to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensive by all means. No one would deny that the recourse of Iranian-made drones has been done almost symmetrically in response to the devastating attacks of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones operated by the Armed

Forces of Ukraine (BCY). Online videos of Russian tanks in flames after being hit by Turkish drones revealed enormous gaps in levels of military capabilities at use on today's battlefields (Malyasov, 2022). As such, it was imperative for Russia to reverse the course of the war by relying upon Iran's experience in developing highly sophisticated technologies for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). The reputation of Iran as a massive drone power can be traced as far as back as 2011 when the Iranians first captured a CIA-guided Lockheed Martin drone and used it as a model for an entire range of equally advanced and high-impact drones (Chacko, 2022). But somehow, despite being under massive economic sanctions and an embargo on technology transfers, Iran has unveiled an arsenal of better developed and more effective UAV systems capable of delivering 2000 km missile strikes with highly effective stealth capabilities. One prominent example is the Shahed-129 combat drone programme unfolded in 2012, a medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) UAV believed to have been copied from the Israeli Hermes-450 type and also known to have intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) functionalities (Shokri, 2022). According to several field reports, Shahed-171 reconnaissance drones have been spotted flying and patrolling several times in the surroundings of Odesa and the Black Sea region (Trofimov & Nissembaum, 2022). Most recently, a portion of a downed kamikaze UAV – namely a Shahed-136 drone manufactured by the Shahed Aviation Industries – was also found near the town of Kupiansk, in the Kharkiv region (Trofimov & Nissembaum, 2022). It is today rather clear that Iranian-engineered combat drones can inflict severe strikes on Ukraine's critical infrastructure and compete with Turkish UACVs. Nevertheless, many analysts have expressed persistent doubts regarding their alleged performance during real-time combat missions, most notably as a result of the Russians themselves experiencing a couple of serious technical defects in early tests (T.S & A., 2022). Though not being a new problem in itself, lack of strike precision continues to be one of the most frequently cited issues affecting Iranian drone missions behind enemy lines. With limited production capacities to reconstitute its drone stocks decimated by the war and with further harsh sanctions looming, Russia has extremely little choice but to get supplied with ever more Iranian UACVs to keep its war machine running.

The Khayyam Satellite Project: The Promising Future of Russia-Iran Space Cooperation

The delivery of Iranian drones in August 2022 was far from being solely a pure demonstration of magnanimity without asking anything in return. Less than a year before the conflict began, Russia saw nothing wrong in accepting to provide Iran with its advanced satellite system called 'Kanopus-V' (Roth, 2022). In close cooperation with the Iranian Space Agency and the state-owned company Bonyan Danesh Sharq, Roscosmos took the reins of the Khayyam satellite project and successfully launched it into orbit on August 9, 2022. The launch operation was hailed by Roscosmos chief Borisov as 'an important milestone for Russian-Iranian bilateral cooperation.' (MacFarquhar et al., 2022). A few weeks earlier, Putin made an official visit to Tehran where he met Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a show of solidarity against the West.

The geostrategic implications are immense as the project intends to grant the Iranians unmatched spying capabilities so as to collect significant intelligence information and high-resolution satellite imagery in the Middle East and even beyond its confines. If fully implemented, the deal may not only symbolise a formidable leap forward in the long-awaited modernization of its surveillance networks but may also lead to major upgrades in its missile guidance systems. Although both Russian and Iranian authorities claim that it has not been designed for military purposes and hence is not a direct menace to Iran's neighbours, Israel and the US reiterated firm opposition to the satellite project and the heightened risk of it adding more fuel to the boiling caldron of the Middle-East. It is feared that Iran might eventually share critical information with friendly rogue states and armed political groups, such as Yemen's Houthi militias and Lebanon's Hezbollah (Zerrouky, 2022). Somewhat inevitably, Iran's new satellite system risks reshuffling the cards against its Saudi rival and, even worse, may crystalize the spectre of a divisive, bloody, if not a grinding war, which neither Russia and nor the United States – both supporting respectively the one against another – might let happen in the future.

Russia and Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict: Power Rivalry or Military Partnership?

Since Putin came to the rescue of his close ally Bashar al-Assad in 2015, Syria has continued to be an essential theatre of operation for both Russia and Iran. Strategic cooperation between the two regional powers intensified after Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu and top-ranked Iranian officials agreed on coordinating efforts and providing military assistance for the tottering Alawite regime (Grajewski, 2021). But the rise of the Islamic State (IS) precipitated the course of events as it became obvious that the days of the Syrian ruler were numbered and that Russian military engagement would be inevitable. To facilitate better coordination with Syria, Iraq and Iran, Moscow established in Bagdad a joint intelligence and information centre in September 2015 (Grajewski, 2021). It is worth noting that relations were further strengthened under the guidance of general Qassem Suleimani a few years before he got assassinated in a drone strike (Crowley et al., 2020). Suleimani had acted over all these years as a privileged intermediary with Putin and Lavrov for the conduct of military operations in Syria. Against all odds, Moscow has never viewed the presence of Iran-backed Hezbollah battalions and other Shia militias in a truly positive light (Grajewski, 2021). Seriously preoccupied with being supplanted by other regional powers, Putin saw military intervention in Syria as part of his grand strategy for the restoration of Russian dominance in the Middle East (Chotiner, 2022). To counter the growing influence of Iran in the Near East, Moscow therefore pulled back into its traditional role of being the main arms supplier to the Syrian Army. On the other side, Iranian military officials felt some resentment towards Russia, accusing it on several occasions of not providing sufficient air support to Iranian forces on the ground (Grajewski, 2021). Such sentiments in Tehran were once again stirred up by Russia's unrestrained use of Iranian military facilities, in particular the Shahid Nojeh airbase, to operate its bombing campaigns.

Another serious point of contention revolved chiefly around integrating the multitude of local proxy forces into the joint operation and dealing with the climate of chaos and discord tearing the whole country apart. But these incidents were overall inconsequential, if not anecdotal, in light of the shared endeavour uniting Russia and Iran on Syrian soil. The ultimate objective of preserving Asad's regime forced both Russia and Iran into putting aside their disagreements and pooling their efforts and resources together for the reconstruction of Syria. An entire decade of war has left the country in a complete state of desolation and misery, with poor access to the most basic needs.

Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that the Russia-Iran strategic partnership seems destined to last for generations to come. While the West summons its allies to rally under the banner of the 'free world', Russia and Iran in turn present a united front in defence of their security and geopolitical interests. In doing so, Russia tries to avoid falling into the same trap of diplomatic isolation and ensuing demonization that followed Crimea's annexation in 2014. As the war in Ukraine continues its escalation to a degree of brutality never witnessed since the end of the Second World War, speeches and strategic rhetoric of Putin and his siloviki have rendered cooperation with Iran even more central to the war effort. It is undoubtedly a bad omen for Ukraine and its Western allies as Iran's delivery of kamikaze drones is expected to offer no respite in the future evolution of the conflict.

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