

## From Sanctions to the JCPOA: Russian Foreign Policy towards Iran

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### Abstract

The nuclear deal between Iran and the P5 + 1 countries is an important political event at the regional and even international levels that could overshadow Iran's relations with many governments. This event, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, is a historical agreement that has provoked many countries' reactions, especially the great powers of the international system. Given Russia's direct presence in the Iranian nuclear case and its unique role as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in proceeding with this case, this descriptive-analytical article examines Russia's policies and orientations towards the nuclear deal.

The main question of this article is what approach has Russia taken to the Iran nuclear deal and what has been its orientation towards Iran in the post-JCPOA period and during the recent Vienna negotiations?

While optimistic about the nuclear deal, it is hypothesized that Russia maintains its economic and political position and interests both in Iran and in the regional and global arenas, with a pragmatic and cautious approach to bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Iran, and therefore has developed its relations in various dimensions with that state.

The theoretical foundations related to the foreign policy orientation of governments and economic sanctions will be first analyzed within this article, and then Russia's policy toward the Iranian nuclear deal and the factors influencing its formation will be examined.

**Keywords:** Foreign relations, Iran, nuclear deal, Russia, sanctions, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

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## Introduction

Iran had been under western sanctions since the Islamic Revolution until the adoption of the JCPOA in 2015, under President Obama's administration. The importance of this event is such that many political analysts have predicted and analyzed the foreign policy trajectory of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the East or West long before the implementation of the JCPOA. Many other political experts have spoken of Iran's unilateral inclination towards the West.

Iran and Russia have gone through ups and downs in bilateral relations with interaction and confrontation. Now, in the current political and international situation, new trends are emerging in the relations between the two countries. At the same time, it is essential to consider the circumstances of Russia's sanctions, as Western embargos against Russia have generally affected the overall direction of Russia's foreign policy.

Iran has gone through a period of instability with the sanctions imposed after the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear agreement. It has begun to move actively in foreign trade. Russia, meanwhile, is under sanctions for invading Ukraine. Therefore, the component of sanctions in the current situation in the relations between the two countries is very decisive.

**This article examines Russia's position towards the JCPOA**, since it has a direct presence in the Iranian nuclear case and a unique role as one of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council in advancing this issue. This article is focusing on the post-embargo period of Iran and the sanctions against Russia, and explores how the two countries interact and cooperate in the current political situation by enumerating the existing opportunities and obstacles.

The current political situation for both countries has provided a favorable environment for developing cooperation and interaction between them. The JCPOA has removed many legal barriers to foreign collaboration with Iran. On the other hand,

Iran's foreign policy and the policy of the then President of Iran, Hassan Rohani, to interact constructively with the world has prevented Iran's unilateralism towards the West. At the same time, Iran has not ignored its interests in the East and cooperation with Eastern powers, including Russia.

It must be mentioned that Russia seeks to meet its essential needs in various areas by imposing an import substitution policy under sanctions. "*Turning to the East*" is another step taken by Russia to mitigate the economic consequences of Western sanctions, which have cast a shadow over its overall foreign policy orientation and will not be ineffective in Russia's orientation toward the JCPOA and the increase of cooperation between the two countries.

After the Islamic Revolution and Germany's failure to continue the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, an agreement was reached between Iran and Russia to complete this power plant in **1995**, which marked the beginning of Russia's active presence in Iran's nuclear program. Despite adherence to Western policies in passing sanctions resolutions against Iran, it has always opposed military action against Iran. The West has presented a plan for the "*peaceful settlement*" of Iran's nuclear case. However, the new Iranian nuclear deal could be a challenging issue for Russia. It provides a good platform for repairing Iran's relations with the West. Given the strained Russian-Western relations following the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula to Russia in 2014, and the recent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the relations between Iran and Russia might have faced new challenges. This article will examine Russia's orientation towards the nuclear deal, considering the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United States. To this end, the evaluation of Russia's positions and approaches at both theoretical and practical levels has been considered.

The main questions are, what approach has Russia taken to the Iranian nuclear deal in the sanctions? Why is it trying to sabotage the agreement

after eleven months of negotiation? Moreover, what has been its orientation towards Iran in the post-JCPOA period?

In response, a **hypothesis is given** regarding Russia being optimistic about the nuclear deal to maintain its economic and political position and interests both in Iran and in the regional and global arenas with a pragmatic and prudent approach to bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Iran in various dimensions.

To examine this idea, first, a theoretical foundation related to the foreign policy orientation of governments and economic sanctions will be analyzed. Then Russia's policies towards the Iranian nuclear deal and the factors influencing its formation will be examined.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Wolf H. Halsti, orientation is the general attitudes and commitments of a government toward the external environment and is considered its primary strategy to achieve internal and external goals and deal with ongoing threats. Halsti cites the orientation alongside roles and goals as foreign policy output. The overall strategy or orientation is seldom reflected in a decision. However, it emerges from a series of subsequent decisions made to adapt goals, values, and interests to the conditions and characteristics of the internal and external environment. Government leaders pursue different orientations and different foreign policies. In fact, in international relations, governments adopt appropriate strategies to achieve their goals in the national interest, considering the structure of the system and the existing internal conditions (Jafarzadeh Bahabadi, Khalili, 2014, p. 42). To understand the foreign policy orientation of governments, one must pay attention to the discourse patterns that shape their behavioral patterns.

Discourse formats can be used in new foreign policy theorizing. Michel Foucault believes that discourse provides the necessary basis for institutional

behavior and the stated position of states. Discourses can help organize non-discourse institutions. In the discourse analysis of politics and foreign policy, the role of power tools in shaping the clauses of political and international behavior is reduced. Words are the only tools to reflect the facts (Motaghi, 2006).

**Pragmatic:** The term "Pragmatism" is derived from the Greek word "pragma," meaning activity. Pragmatism is an attempt to interpret any concept through its practical consequences. William James considers this theory a way of orienting and turning to fruits and results.

In Persian sources, pragmatism, expediency, and the doctrine of originality of action are the equivalents mentioned for the word pragmatism. Moreover, pragmatism has been named a doctrine that examines the value of actions and thoughts based on the benefits and consequences of that action and emphasizes what should be done in the real world and not the ideal. In this theory, truth and usefulness are entirely intertwined, and the truth is considered expediency. Political pragmatism, like classical pragmatism, is a form of instrumentalism that emphasizes empirical science, results, thought, action, and opportunities under existing conditions (Noori, 2010, pp. 21-31).

**The JCPOA:** The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an international agreement on **Iran's nuclear program signed on July 14, 2015, between Iran and the P5 + 1 countries (U.S., Russia, China, France, Britain, and Germany) in Vienna. According to the JCPOA, Iran will be exempted from sanctions by the U.N. Security Council, the European Union, and the United States if it fulfills its obligations.** Following the parties' accession to the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action, the U.N. Security Council formally endorsed the agreement by issuing Resolution 2231, incorporating it into international law, and legally binding the JCPOA (Mizan Online, 2015, p. 75327).

Since the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been subject to U.S. sanctions.

However, the debate has been going on at the macro level in recent years; under the heading of the sanctions system against Iran, the Iranian nuclear case was referred to at the U.N. Security Council in 2006. It should be noted that many governments unilaterally and multilaterally sanctioned Iran for its nuclear program activities throughout the years. Therefore, the application of the embargo had a significant impact on the level of political, economic, and cultural interactions between Iran and many countries, including economic relations with Russia.

Following the Ukraine crisis in February 2014 and the eventual annexation of Crimea to Russia, Western-Russian disputes erupted. However, the European Union and the United States imposed increasing sanctions on Russia to halt its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In 2014, E.U. and U.S. sanctions were imposed on Russia at three levels: diplomatic, economic, and individual. Russia's expulsion from the G8 was one of the punitive measures taken against Russia. In addition, some U.S. and European Union allies, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway, and Switzerland, have imposed sanctions on Russia (Sabaghian, Samoodi, 2014, p. 93).

Russia also took retaliatory measures in response to E.U. and U.S. sanctions. Among these measures was a ban on food imports, announced in August 2014 by President Putin and extended until August 15, 2016 ([www.tks.ru](http://www.tks.ru), 27.08.2015). According to this order, banned imported products were destroyed at the Russian border (Pravda URFO, 2015: [pravdaurfo.ru](http://pravdaurfo.ru)). Goods banned from importation into Russia included products made in the European Union, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Norway ([www.Kazakh-zerno.kz](http://www.Kazakh-zerno.kz), 2015).

Following the sanctions imposed, the Russian economy in 2014-2015 was in a state of financial crisis. In June 2014, global oil prices fell 50% due to sanctions. As a result, dependent on energy exports, the Russian economy faced new challenges. However, until April 2022, oil and gas prices increased sharply,

with both major oil benchmarks trading above \$110, which represents a further 15% increase over the second week of April 2022.

At the same time, the ban on imports of E.U. and U.S. products to Russia increased the consumer price by 8.5%; following the Ruble's devaluation, the foreign debt of Russian companies, banks, and businesses also increased (Iglesias, 2022).

Since February 2022, the Russian economy has shown clear signs of recession. The decline in Russia's GDP, rising inflation in food and other consumer goods, rising unemployment, and declining living standards of many Russian citizens are related to the sanctions imposed on Russia.

According to Khaladkov (V.M. Cold), in 2014, Washington resorted to economic sanctions, including manipulating the global oil market, to lower oil prices to destabilize the financial systems of Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and other unfriendly countries. The United States launched some of its strategic oil reserves in March 2014. Following President Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia and talks with the king on coordinating measures to reduce oil and gas prices in the second half of 2014 from 108 U.S. dollars to \$ 54 a barrel (Kholodkov, 2015, RISI). On the other hand, economic sanctions harmed the possibility of receiving funds and financial credits for Russian banks and caused a slump in investment in the country, which led to a devaluation of the Ruble in 2014 (Klinova, Sidorova, 2014, p. 73). The sanctions on specific banks and the SWIFT banking network blocked exports of crucial technology to Russia since February 2022.

Experts believe that the most significant problems can arise in imports. Russia's economy is heavily dependent on imports of advanced technologies, machinery, medicine, and especially food. Russia's leading importers, meanwhile, are E.U. member states that have imposed sanctions on Russia (Graf, 2015); Russia was forced to adopt an "*import substitution*" policy (Bortsov, 2015). Implementing the "*turn to the east*" strategy was another Russian strategy to counter Western sanctions. According to

Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Kholodkov, the government's actions in the "*turn to the east*" strategy have had significant results in the geographical diversity of foreign economic relations (Bortsov, 2016, RISI). He also believes that anti-sanctions programs such as the expansion of production, alternative imports, allocation of government resources to replenish systematic and critical banks, and trade with China and other developing countries through national exchange currencies diminished the effectiveness of Western sanctions.

"It can be argued that the Russian economy is accustomed to the conditions of sanctions." In this regard, Khaladkov considers the oil industry and the activities of the banking sector as evidence of this claim. According to him, there is no decline in the oil industry, although the United States has prohibited the import of Russian oil, natural gas, and petroleum products.

In Russia in 2015, oil production increased by 1.3 percent (533.2 million tons compared to 526 million tons in 2014), and exports of "black gold" increased by 8.6 percent to 222.3 million tons. In the first quarter of 2016, oil extraction increased by 4.5 percent (up to 137 million tons) compared to the same period in 2015, and exports by 4.3 percent (up to 61.9 million tons). Since the beginning of the Ukrainian invasion, Russia lost about 30% of its oil output.

### **Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Case**

During Medvedev's foreign policy term, the Russian government voted in favor of six sanctions resolutions against Iran at the U.N. Security Council.

Under Putin, with the sanctions imposed on Russia, Russia reduced its relations with the West and improved it with Iran. Throughout the years, Russia tried to reduce the pressure on Iran by playing a mediator role between Iran and the West. To keep its regional supremacy, Russia prefers to have Iran under sanctions.

Russia-Iran relations on the nuclear issue follow three concepts, which are the main concepts governing Russia's foreign policy on the nuclear issue (Karami,2013).

- Preventing the situation from escalating;
- Resolving the issue in the framework of dialogue and negotiation;
- Mediation through a step-by-step plan.

Russia argues that blocking access to nuclear weapons should not be a factor in expanding the West's strategic territory to interfere in countries' internal affairs and violate national sovereignty at the global level (Karami, 2013). For the Russians to uphold the NPT and international rules within the framework of this international treaty is a fundamental principle.

Another point is security concerns about nuclear proliferation and weapons of mass destruction. Naturally, Russia seeks a nuclear monopoly. As mentioned above, to maintain its own nuclear monopoly, Russia is opposed to Iran's nuclearization in the military dimension; however, at the same time, they emphasize the use of peaceful nuclear energy. In this regard, they presented plans, which are: **a.** Iran's resource transfer plan, **b.** Step-by-step plan, **c.** Participation in the P5 + 1 meetings to resolve nuclear issues. In this context, the Bushehr power plant was finally put into operation despite various delays in 2011.

**Article 89** of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Concept, adopted in 2013, refers to the settlement of Iran's nuclear program as follows: "Russia has always pursued a balanced policy in the political and diplomatic settlement of Iran's nuclear program by holding step-by-step talks. The step will be reciprocal and based on strict compliance with the requirements of the NPT (Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2013, p. 89). In paragraph 94 of the latest version of this document, published in 2016, the JCPOA is mentioned as a policy of comprehensive development of cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran and implementing the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty following

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 (Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2016, p. 94).

Considering the adherence to the goals and principles of the Charter of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization and also considering the need to strengthen cooperation mechanisms of the five Caspian littoral states, this document mentions within Article 60 - the need for Russia to cooperate with the Caspian Sea and Black Sea states. In addition, paragraph 96 refers to the expansion of interaction with the countries of the Islamic world and the development of partnerships with them in various matters. In addition to interaction with other countries, the last two cases also emphasize the importance of interaction and cooperation with Iran.

Since the return of the United States to the JCPOA, and the P5+1 had been working on a new agreement with Iran. Although all countries were close to reaching an agreement with Iran in March 2022, the Russian government halted the process. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia has been under sanctions from many countries, resulting in the latter seeing the JCPOA as an opportunity. On the last day of the negotiation, Russia requested "written guarantees" from the United States that the sanctions imposed on that state would not affect its economic and military cooperation with Iran.

Russia's orientation towards the Iran nuclear deal can be assessed theoretically and practically. Reaching a new agreement in this situation would help Iran raise its economy. Having the JCPOA talks taken hostage by Russia to its benefit and way out from sanctions is not a situation Iran would like to see itself tied to, even if it has always seen Russia as a strategic partner or even an ally. However, Javad Zarif, the former Iranian foreign minister, insisted during a leaked audio interview in 2021 that Russia opposed the JCPOA and worked closely with the Quds Force to destroy the nuclear deal, despite helping to negotiate its creation. According to Zarif, Russia's policy is to ensure that Iran remains Washington's number-one challenge in the region.

In follow, Russian officials and political analysts' positions and points of view are presented at the theoretical level, and at the practical level, Russia's actions and actions concerning Iran are outlined.

### **Russia's View on JCPOA**

On July 14, 2015, after signing the JCPOA Agreement, Vladimir Putin expressed his satisfaction with the Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty between Iran and the P5 + 1. "Today, the world breathed a sigh of relief," he said. He went on to say that "a comprehensive agreement is based on the strong foundations of international law, in particular the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards agreement, including the Additional Protocol."

Despite attempts to resort to military scenarios, the negotiators made a decisive choice in favor of stability and cooperation, enshrined in a U.N. Security Council resolution. He also pointed to the outstanding expertise of the Russian negotiating team in preparing this agreement and the existence of political will between the P5 + 1 and Iran, noting the emergence of new solid impetus in bilateral relations with Iran, regardless of the influence of external factors. Putin also concluded by saying that Russia, while helping to strengthen regional and international security, the global non-proliferation regime, the creation of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, and their means of distribution in the Middle East, as well as mobilizing a broad coalition in the region to counter terrorist threats, will do whatever it takes to fully implement the Vienna Agreement (Putin, 2015, kremlin.ru). Sergey Lavrov also noted the effectiveness of Russia's step-by-step and reciprocal plan to break the deadlock over the nuclear deal (Lavrov,2015). In addition, he considered the agreement necessary for implementing extensive plans for Russian cooperation with Iran in peaceful nuclear energy (Putin, 2015).

The final agreement JCPOA is in line with the goal set out in Russian foreign policy theory, namely recognizing Iran's right to peaceful nuclear activities,

including the right to enrich uranium and carry out this activity under strict IAEA control; A comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear program will strengthen the non-proliferation regime and positively impact the overall security and stability situation in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf; in Addition, it will eliminate existing excuses for using force against Iran.

It must be noted that the normalization of the situation in Iran eliminates any pretext for using force against that state, which some have considered a "*real alternative*" to the negotiations.

#### **Impact on Tehran-Moscow relations:**

There is no doubt that the settlement of Iran's nuclear program will impact bilateral relations between Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran and open a broader perspective for their deepening and diversification. This is related to the implementation of extensive plans to build new units of nuclear facilities and power plants in Iran, the implementation of which is fully insured against any negative impact of external factors within the framework of the agreement reached.

The lifting of the sanctions system will allow progress in other areas of bilateral cooperation. It will stop imposing unilateral restrictions on the U.S. and European Union in financial transactions and other aspects of business activities between Iran and other states. Sergey Lavrov also noted the expansion of military-technical cooperation opportunities between Russia and Iran which has increased since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Members of the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia and regional intelligence services reported to the Guardian News Agency in April 2022 that the smuggling network was receiving weapons Russia needed from Iran through Iraq. According to the same report, the Iranian-made "Bavar 373" defense system, similar to the Russian S-300 missile defense system, was provided to Moscow by Iran (The Guardian, 2022). The Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Abdollahian also blamed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for Russia's attack on Ukraine

and announced in February 2022 Iran's support for Russia.

Following the JCPOA agreement, Sergey Lavrov declared Russia's future cooperation with Iran. as follows:

- Opening new opportunities to resolve other problems and conflicts in the region;
- Create more incentives to advance the creation of a weapons-free zone in the Middle East;
- Removing obstacles (largely fictitious) to form a broad coalition to fight ISIS and other terrorist groups (Lavrov, 2015: mid.ru).

During President Trump's administration and after the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA agreement, the United States repeatedly threatened Iran, resulting in the assassination of a high-rank Iranian General named Qasem Soleimani (White House, 2020) , an incident Iran is still looking for revenge on it (Pakpour, 2022: IRGC).

It can be concluded that although Iran and Russia are military allies in the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and post-Soviet Central Asia, and now in Ukraine, when it comes to the JCPOA and sanctions against Iran, Russia considers its regional and global benefits first. As mentioned previously, Moscow is ready to delay, halt or sabotage the eleven months of the Vienna negotiations to receive a "written guarantee" from the United States that Russia would not be affected by the sanctions over the invasion of Ukraine of its economic, military-technical cooperation and investment with Iran (Lavrov, 2022).

#### **Collaborations in the Post-JCPOA Period**

**The S-300 missile defense:** A few days after the Lausanne nuclear deal in April 2015, the Russian President lifted the ban on exporting the S-300 missile system to Iran. After the JCPOA and the lifting of anti-Iranian sanctions, the complete delivery of the S-300 missile defense system to Iran was decided. The Islamic Republic of Iran broadcast the first video

introducing this system in mid-September 2016 (Press T.V.,2016, p. 482125).

**Allocation of multi-billion credit and loans from Russia to Iran:** Many economic sanctions had already been lifted from Tehran soon after the signature of the JCPOA in 2015; Moscow hoped to increase its exports to Iran immediately afterward. During the meeting of intergovernmental commissions in November 2015 and the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Tehran, the payment of loans through two lines of credit, one through the Foreign Economic Bank (2 billion euros) and the other through the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation (5 billion USD) was raised (Kalinina,2016, kommersant.ru). With its financial problems, Moscow could hardly give Tehran much credit to stimulate the import of Russian goods into the Iranian market. In 2016, the Russian government provided Tehran with 2.2 billion euros (Trenin, 2016, carnegie.ru).

**Supporting Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization:** Iran's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a political community of non-Western countries centered on China and Russia, was raised by Russia at 2016 conference in Shanghai (Trenin, 2016, carnegie.ru).

**Strengthen regional engagement with Iran, considering the situation in Syria:** The political-military situation in Syria led to the direct interaction of the Russian and Iranian armed forces on the battlefield. Syria's current events and situation have further stimulated military-political cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. Iran-Russia practical convergence has intensified with the start of the Russian Air Force operation in Ukraine since February 2022 (President Raisi, 2022).

According to Trenin, Russia and Iran act as close military allies in Syria, although this does not mean they have the same political strategies (Trenin,2016: carnegie.ru).

President Vladimir Putin visited Iran on November 3, 2017, and frequent visits of officials of both countries were made to strengthen cooperation in various fields. President Putin announced his intention to increase trade with Iran. He also announced Russia's support for the nuclear deal and Iran-Russia cooperation in supporting President Bashar Al Assad in Syria. At the end of the visit, Khamenei proposed to President Putin to enhance Iran-Russia cooperation to isolate America and decrease its influence in the region. The Iranian Supreme Leader also proposed using national currencies in bilateral transactions to "nullify" the effect of U.S. sanctions (Khamenei.ir, 2017).

Since Ambassador Valentina Ivanovna Matviyenko visited Iran in November 2016, many issues related to scientific and cultural cooperation, construction of thermal and nuclear power plants, legal contracts, the fight against international terrorism, and increasing interaction have been discussed and worked on.

**Russian companies' interest in participating in the Iranian market post-JCPOA:** Large Russian companies have studied the possibility of cooperating with Iran. Lukoil, Russia's largest oil company, seeks to enter the Iranian oil and gas market; Since 2018, Zarubezhneft, a Russian state-controlled oil company based in Moscow, has started its activities in Iran (Radiofarda, 2018).

Russia's aerospace industry, which has revived after a sharp decline in recent years, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is looking for new export opportunities (Trenin, 2016, carnegie.ru).

Russia's nuclear cooperation with Iran continues; A few months before the approval of the JCPOA in November 2014, a new contract was signed between Iran and Russia for the construction of two nuclear power plants with Russian technology, with the cost of about \$ 11 billion. According to the JCPOA agreement, Iran has exported up to 10 tons of low-enriched uranium to Russia in exchange for natural uranium. Following the completion of the construction



of the Bushehr nuclear power plant in September 2015, the Russian company *Atom Russia* has begun the preparation of a technical plan for the rearrangement of companies at the Fordow Research Center for the production of stable isotopes. Another example of Russian companies' cooperation with Iran are: *Technopromexport*, a subsidiary of the state-owned Rostex (Guliyeva, 2017).

Also, Iranian companies signed contracts with Russia, such as, Iranian Railways, 2015. Therefore. In addition, Tehran has bought modern S-400s, T-190 tanks, Cy-30 fighter jets, Kilo-class submarines (Type 877EKM), T-72 tanks, and BMP-2 infantry armored vehicles, Mi-17 helicopters, and various anti-tank systems (such as the 9K115-2 Metis-M guided missiles) in 2021 from Russia.

In 2015, Vladimir Putin signed a decree lifting Russia's previous sanctions on Iran while respecting the restrictions set out in the U.N. Security Council resolution on resolving the Iranian nuclear issue (Website of the Iranian Embassy in Russia, 2015). In 2016, Russia also approved a plan to provide visa waivers for Iranian travelers traveling to Russia.

**Shared interests and convergence on critical regional issues and common international concerns:** Russia-Iran political dialogue has been founded on the similarity or closeness of the interests of both countries on important global and regional issues, in particular, the establishment of multipolar world order, strengthening the role of the United Nations in international affairs and facing new challenges and threats, and settling the situation in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Russia believes that cooperation with Iran is essential for Russia's national interests, strengthening stability in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East (Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2015). Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation leader have a very negative attitude toward U.S. policies that have imposed sanctions on both countries. Refusal to accept U.S. global domination forms the basis of both

countries' foreign policy doctrines. On the world stage, Iran, like Russia, is trying to limit U.S. influence in its region. In this sense, Moscow and Tehran can be called strategic partners; They confront the common world order that emerged after the Cold War (Trenin, 2016, *carnegie.ru*).

**Independent Iranian foreign policy (neither East nor West):** According to this policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, even after the lifting of sanctions in 2015, considered its national interests and the requirements for the realization and comprehensive preservation of unilateralism and refused to have relations with the West, while pursuing an independent policy in dealing with the world.

**The importance of Iran's transit for Russia:** Russia today is actively seeking economic relations with the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia through the North-South axis; In the meantime, as a transit country, Iran is crucial for Russia. At the Tripartite Summit in Baku in August 2016, the Russian Presidents, Iran, and Azerbaijan stated that they would make every effort to build 7,200 km of the transit corridor, which was mainly a railway connecting the three countries. Given the size of the population and the possibility of technological, educational, and cultural growth, Iran has opened a comprehensive economic outlook for Russia (Trenin, 2016, *carnegie.ru*).

**Iran nuclear deal:** The Iranian nuclear deal is one of the most important components influencing the expansion of Iran-Russia cooperation. After lifting Security Council sanctions on Iran, a favorable environment for further relations with Iran was provided. For example, facilitating Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and facilitating the removal of legal barriers for the two countries' banks.

**Competitiveness of the Iranian market:** Following the lifting of most of the sanctions on January 16, 2016, Iran's circle of potential partners increased significantly, which immediately led to additional demands on Russia (Kalinina, 2016:

kommersant.ru). According to Sanai, some Russian media outlets in the previous government were influenced by the global news atmosphere against Iran. (Sanaei, 2015, Tccim.ir). Therefore, with the lifting of comprehensive sanctions on Iran, the influential Western spectrum in Russian foreign policy has not been able to hinder the expansion of relations between the two countries.

**The foreign policy of the current Iranian government is based on constructive interaction with the world:** The ruling government in Iran implemented an interactive policy with the whole world. It has attracted the attention of many Western powers, especially after lifting sanctions and implementing the JCPOA. However, looking East was also an essential part of this policy, and interaction with Russia was one of the pillars of this policy.

**The Iranian Supreme Leader urged the negotiation with the U.S. only on the nuclear issue:** The Iranian leadership has allowed negotiations with the United States only on the nuclear issue. Although the JCPOA agreement improves Iran's relations with the West, it will not resolve the significant differences between Iran and the United States, and therefore, it will not be a threat to Russia's interests.

**Tensions in Russia's relations with the West and the sanctions imposed on Russia by the U.S. and European Union:**

Russia's relations with the West are not in good condition in the current situation. The sanctions on Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have increased. Nevertheless, Russia has said it will not cut off gas exports to Europe, yet it demanded to be paid in rubles. Russian President Vladimir Putin

signed a decree beginning of April 2022 stating buyers must pay in rubles through Russian bank accounts (Reuters.com:2022). Russia is the largest single deliverer of natural gas to the European Union, and demands are only set to rise. For example, Germany is dependent on non-renewable energy sources in its energy mix, including fossil fuels and nuclear, which is 50% of the total energy mix. Almost a third comes from coal, 12 % from nuclear, and about 14% from natural gas. As Germany is phasing out nuclear power later this year, and coal will be phased out by 2038, those figures will increase. Currently, 55% of German gas import comes from Russia. That is a higher dependence than across the European Union, where the average is 40% of imports from Russia. Gas revenues place a relatively more minor role than oil in Russia's state budget, and Russia is also attempting to diversify gas flows to the east. The export of gas to the European Union is relevant but not vital to Russia for geopolitical gains (Pepe, SWP, 2022).

Although the European Union foreign ministers met in Luxembourg to support Ukraine in April 2022 and discussed ways to expand their support for that state by weaponizing it more, they remained divided on sanctions over the Russian oil and gas.

As previously mentioned, both countries have emerged as rivals in the regional and global energy markets due to their energy resources and an economy based on the sale of raw materials. Each of them is pursuing their national and economic interests. In this regard, the implementation of the JCPOA might be beneficial to both sides and motivate them to resolve banking barriers using the nuclear deal with the European Union and the United States.

## Conclusions

- a. Iran and Russia have gone through tumultuous bilateral relations with interaction and confrontation. Based on the issues, it can be said that the Iran nuclear deal plays a crucial role in Russia's foreign policy. The statements of Russian officials proved a positive attitude toward the JCPOA until April 2022. Russia showed its support to Iran after the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA during President Trump's administration.
- b. While positively approaching the nuclear agreement to maintain its position and economic and political interests in Iran, in the region and global arenas, Russia has developed multilateral cooperation with Iran in various dimensions.
- c. The relations between Russia and Iran increased once the Iranian leadership's insistence on negotiating with the United States only on the nuclear issue. Furthermore, the Iranian government's foreign policy of constructive engagement with the whole world, threats and common interests of Iran and Russia on regional and international issues, as well as mutual interests in cooperating with Eastern powers, and the support of President Bashar Al-Assad, are some other reasons of close relations between Iran and Russia.
- d. Russian and Western tensions over NATO expansion and the NATO missile shield plan,

the Ukraine crisis, the western economic sanctions against Russia, and Russia's retaliatory actions against the West, the temporary blurring of Russian-Turkish relations have also provided a favorable ground for accelerating the improvement of relations between Iran and Russia.

- e. The "*looking to the East*" policy, which has been on the Russian agenda since the Primakov Evgeny Maksimovic era, has opened the door for Russia to implement this pre-designed policy. Mobilizing and dynamizing this approach in turning to the east and increasing Russia's cooperation with Asian countries such as China, India, and Iran have been pursued within this policy.
- f. Since February 2022, Russia has been hit by several economic sanctions;

These sanctions will shrink the Russian economy by 15% this year. To combat the sanctions, Russia has turned to China and Iran. The new gas pipeline named Power Siberia2 project between Russia and China and the increase in export to china might help the Russian economy. This pipeline going through Mogolia could deliver up to 50 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to China. This project reduces Moscow's dependence on European Markets, and as it is drawn on the same gas fields used to supply the European markets, providing Russia with additional leverage when dealing with European customers.

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