

Syrian Crisis and Russian-Iranian Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

The Syrian crisis could be perceived as the most important international crisis in the recent decade. Despite its extensively varied regional and international ramifications and repercussions, this crisis has changed Iran-Russia cooperation patterns in significant way. Prior to the outbreak of crisis in Syria, Iran and Russia had limited, traditional cooperation at different junctures in Afghanistan, the Tajikistan civil war and some regional issues in the Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, the new era of Iranian-Russian relations in Syria exhibits a new level of bilateral relations. Thus, the current Iran-Russia bilateral ties could be assessed within the framework of strategic partnership. Iran-Russia strategic partnership pattern has emerged in line with three essential criteria of environmental uncertainty (popular uprisings in the Middle East), strategic fit (compatibility and complementarity of Iranian and Russian interests and resources) and the system principle (opposition to the US new hegemonic order and exercising efforts to institute a desired order in the Middle East). Compared to traditional patterns such as strategic alliance, thematicity and low commitment costs of the new pattern have encouraged Tehran and Moscow to pick it up. This paper attempts to answer this question: what mechanism underlies the development of Iran-Russia relations since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis?

Keywords: *Iran, Russia, Strategic Partnership, Strategic Fit, System Principle, Environmental Uncertainty*

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Introduction

Since the years of post-USSR collapse, the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation have gone through numerous peaks and troughs, each analyzed within certain framework of international relations patterns. Iran-Russia relations were pushed into a new phase of cooperation in the wake of outbreak of the Syrian crisis as the confluence of the processes induced by popular uprisings which have affected the regional Middle East order. Prior to this crisis, the two countries had forged constructive cooperation in regional crises in Afghanistan and Tajikistan which profoundly contributed to the regional security and stability. However, the new Iran-Russia cooperation is different in nature than their previous cooperation rounds considering the depth of the Syrian crisis and its wide range of effects. These relations have been analyzed by international relations experts according to a variety of patterns, covering strategic alliance to a coalition of convenience as indicated by most theories. Over time and following other unfolding regional and international developments such as Ukraine Crisis, Crimean Accession to Russia and the nuclear deal (the JCPOA) concluded between Iran and P5+1 countries in 2015, further complexities were introduced into these relations which seriously questioned previous analyses. As a result, the recent Iran-Russia relations is different from previous ties in terms of quality, quantity, level, means, components and the range of influence. The analysis of such relations thus demands novel analytical patterns considering such complexities and developments. Strategic partnership is one of such patterns.

As an emerging pattern in inter-state relations, strategic partnership gradually found its way in the literature of the 21st international relations in both theory and practice and came to be applied by several international actors such as EU, China, Russia, Brazil and India. This paper attempts to answer this question: what mechanism underlies the development of Iran-Russia relations since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis? Given the circumstances affecting the new Iran-Russia relations by the Syrian crisis matching the three essential principles of environmental uncertainty, strategic fit and system principle, strategic partnership has been the primary mechanism in development of Iran-Russia relations. By employing the theoretical framework of strategic partnership model presented by Thomas Wilkins, this paper intends to explain and analyze Iran-Russia relations. The paper mainly intends to provide a theoretical explanation for the inception of strategic partnership –given the unique characteristics of Iran-Russia relations- to enable the prediction of the future developments and terms of these relations in terms of components, characteristics, outcomes and the requirements of the model.

Inter-state relations follow varied models based on their qualitative and quantitative components. Here, models such as coalition, alliance, cooperation, partnership and conflict are used to describe the status of inter-state relations. Now and then, terms such as strategic –indicating enhanced interests and extended duration of the relations- are employed to add to the content and functional richness of the model. Today, however, expanded dimensions and more complex nature of relations between states have sidelined older models in favor of new ones. Strategic partnership has been considered and reconsidered in the literature of international relations from the outset of the new century. Content analysis of British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English reveal that this term was rarely used prior to the 90s in international relations (Blanco, 2011:3). This model has been increasingly used in foreign policy doctrines,

bilateral legal documents, words of politicians and scientific texts of international relations experts.

Today, the EU has signed more than 10 strategic partnership documents. This number exceeds to more than 20 for India more and 50 for China (Zhongping & Jing, 2014:4). Russia has signed more than 14 strategic partnership documents. Functional diversity and extensiveness of these relations is the first thing that captures attention in such strategic partnership documents. In some cases, even the countries closest in political and international stances are yet to sign any formal strategic partnership and their relations are not construed in strategic partnership terms. In contrast, there are actors that have signed strategic partnership memoranda of understanding in spite of remarkable political, economic and security differences. In other words, it should be noted that although some international actors are strategic partners, their relations may not be fed by this concept (Kundani, 2012). Another interesting point is that there is not a single, specific definition for strategic partnership, even by those countries adopting this model in their engagements. For example, there is no specific definition for strategic partnership in any of EU documents or statements (Grevi, 2012:2). Some researchers believe this to be natural and strategic partnership “should not” be in fact bound to any specific definition. As a matter of fact, every case of strategic partnership should be defined as a context-specific phenomenon which makes it unique and case-particular (Blanco, 2011:9). Therefore, it could be argued that Iran-Russia strategic partnership could receive a unique definition in proportion to the conditions, components, propositions, structural determinations and historical characteristics of the model of their bilateral relations.

Despite plural definitions and functions, strategic partnership has a number of distinguishing minimal and maximum principles and components. For Mansingh, strategic partnership takes place when two governments agree to raise the level of their regular interactions to embrace levels from the lowest to highest, to deal

with the great variety of issues that concern each of them in a cordial and holistic manner seeking cooperation or understanding, and to make long-term commitments for mutual cooperation and furthering their respective goals, but stop short of entering an alliance (Mansingh, 2005:2221). In another conceptual and functional exploration, Czechowska sets out seven constitutive features for inception of strategic partnership between states:

1. Partnership nature of the relation,
2. Convergence of strategic goals of different parties,
3. Mutual conviction that through combination of the efforts could increase the probability of implementing cohesive strategic goals,
4. Authentic and long-term cooperation for fulfilling the common goals,
5. Preference and intensity of contacts that surpasses the ordinary level (for those states) of closeness with other partners,
6. Highly developed infrastructure of relations,
7. Positive atmosphere of bilateral relations (Czechowska, 2013:51).

It is noteworthy that the concept of “strategic”, does not relate to military aspects. It rather falls within the scope of business and refers to a long-term initiative developed to realize specific goals or shaping a desirable future. This is no surprising as the concept of strategic partnership originates in organizational and commercial studies (Wilkins, 2008:363). When it comes to functional use, it is the constructions and impressions derived from the “strategic” concept that defines the features of strategic partnership to some extent. Consequently, strategic partnerships could take 5 specific modes. First interpreting the strategic aspect as a “strategic goal” such as NATO & EU membership in Lithuania-Polish partnership, second as “strategic national interests” such as US hegemony in the U.S.–Poland or the U.S.–Japan partnerships, third as cooperation in the strategically

important areas for stimulation of projects beneficial to trade and economics such as EU – Chinese strategic partnership, fourth as strategic actors in form of potentially powerful and influential states such as US-EU and Russo-Indian strategic partnership and fifth as strategic action in form of changes in international

structure in Russo-Chinese strategic partnership (Gajauskaitė, 2013:192). On a more functional note, Wilkins mentions three essential criteria to formation of strategic partnership. The first criterion is environmental uncertainty which usually occurs when states respond to the uncertainty present in the international environment. Here, actors join together to increase their capabilities and flexibility to counter this uncertainty (Wilkins, 2008:364). The partners may have common threat perceptions, but these are not the decisive factor for collaboration as they are for conventional alliances. Given environmental uncertainty, the parties involved would then constitute a strategic partnership based on mutual interests and possibly also shared values (or ideology). Partners should furthermore bring "some worthwhile capability or benefit, especially complementary resources", to their alignment (Geldenhuis, 2015:125). The second is 'strategic fit', that is, the degree of mutual interests, perhaps shared values/ideology, and the resources and other benefits that might contribute to partnership (Wilkins, 2010:125). What Wilkins (2008: 364) refers to as values or ideologies can be treated as elements constituting the normative content of the agreements (Geldenhuis, 2015:126). An effective strategic partnership must be sustained by shared values and ideas, which will allow the parties to successfully cooperate in the search for common goals. Since the focus of a strategic partnership is supposedly the development of cooperation in shared strategic areas of interest, thus, any conflict concerning values and ideas naturally leads to an ineffective search for goals and the constitution of a failing or "false" strategic partnership (Blanco, 2011:17). However, it should be noted that although some levels of common values must exist in any strategic partnership, what constitutes strategic partnership is its pragmatic character based on type of strategic goals being pursued (Blanco, 2011:17). As a matter of fact, the smart balance between pragmatism and valuiism could be perceived as the common thread of any strategic partnership. Depending on the balance, strategic partnership could be variably

defined in different situations which have allowed for flexibility, appeal and the wide range of applications of this pattern.

System principle is the third criterion proposed by Wilkins. This principle refers to a general joint purpose around which strategic partnership is organized. This purpose is then converted to a comprehensive framework of agreement and common understanding and provides the *raison d'être* for partnership. In practice, System principle should be divided into a series of special joint purposes (Wilkins, 2008:364). However, it should be noted that individual partners are perfectly capable of deviating from these official goals, through their pursuit of covert (or 'unofficial') national objectives. The political leadership, often supported by business and military interests, typically plays a key role in initiating and presiding over the formation process of strategic partnership (Wilkins, 2010:125).

An attraction of a strategic partnership during the formation phase is its informal nature and low commitment costs as opposed to an alliance. In their Joint Declaration on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Russia and South Africa indeed declare that theirs "does not seek to create a military-political alliance" and is not directed against any other State or group of States (Geldenhuis, 2015:128). Therefore, in an emerging world of complexities of politics and international relations, countries are more inclined to the informal nature and preservation of positive commitments of cooperation rather than forming strong alliances with their high political, economic and security costs in the current evolving world. This type of partnership could prove more applicable in highly volatile, evolving regions such as the Middle East and for countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran to which other regional and international actors are particularly sensitive in political-security terms. Therefore, given the positive results of Iran-Russian partnership in Syria and their strategic convergence in this crisis along with their efforts to expand the potential areas of cooperation, numerous fields may be earmarked for inception of a

pattern of strategic partnership for future Iran-Russian bilateral relations in the Middle East. This could be extended to other fields considering the previous successful cooperation of these two countries in dealing with crises in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

I. Strategic Partnership

Environmental Uncertainty in the Syrian Crisis

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa started in the early 2010 in Tunisia. These uprising sparked a wave that swept through other Arab countries of the region, promising formation of a new order to replace the existing one (Husseini, 2013:62). This new order had roots in two important, essential outcomes of these popular uprisings.

First the uncertainty of future: developments that followed the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa fuelled substantial transformations in the region. It seems that at least it takes a decade (an even longer) for the Middle East to find its final shape. However, (in spite of elapse of 7 years), it is anyone's guess who will seize the power in the future and what directions will be taken by countries undergoing such transformation processes. The second is changes in the relations of the actors: popular uprisings in the Middle East changed both the shape and nature of intra-regional relations of those countries involved in the conflicts as well as their relations with other actors, major powers in particular (Bahman, 2012:32-33). Although the West led by the US was at first startled at the pace and magnitude of the developments, it quickly attempted to infiltrate and influence the MENA post-cold war order to its own advantage. For this, the US adopted a series of policies to control and manage the regional popular uprisings that fell within the political pragmatism framework of the Obama administration. The US tried to secure its interests through adoption of a non-ideological, non-security approach, indirect management, looking at the results of policies rather than the predefined, rigid principles, avoidance of unnecessary wars, multilateralism and lowering the costs of direct

interventions. To this end, the US practiced, at macro levels measures, direct foreign interventions to apparent changes in the ruling elites. In the long run, the US will attempt to manage the challenges arising out of these reconciliations via contributing to domestic reforms, continued military involvement in the region and the target countries, avoiding relying on a single ally, promotion of a secular edition of Islam, approaching the civil, Islamic communities of the region, advancing the human rights discourse and furthering the reconciliation processes (Govhari MOghaddam, 2014:138). The previous trends in these countries indicate the comparative success of the US policies and formation of a new order.

However, the outbreak of the Syrian crisis posed challenges to US desired order. This crisis has completely overshadowed the security order of the Middle East, turning Syria into the interface of conflicting discourses on one hand and the interests of diverse actors on the other hand. This is why most analysts believe that the resolution for Syrian crisis would presumably set the tone for inception of the new regional order (Shoori, 2018:81). The ensuing environment of uncertainty drives development of fronts in this crisis. The experience of getting caught off the guard in Tunisia, discretion in Egypt, dualism in Libya, silence in Bahrain and inertia in Yemen (Bahman, 2012:33-38), made Russia to decide resolutely to offset mistakes of the West in Iraq and Libya through direct intervention in Syria (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016:3). When it comes to its surrounding environment, Iran has invariably followed a consistent, clear policy on the US imposed order. Therefore, Iran and Russia decided to stand together once they perceived their interests in jeopardy in the wake of the prevailing environment of uncertainty of the new Middle East order and its corollaries.

Strategic Fit and Complementarity of the Values/Interests:
The second criterion in formation of strategic partnership is strategic compatibility which stresses the affinity and complementarity of the interests and resources of the interested

parties (Galang, 2017:2). Wilkins maintains that in environments of uncertainty, countries engage in strategic partnership based on shared values and interests. Here, the parties should introduce valuable and compatible capabilities and interests into their partnerships, particularly complementary resources (Wilkins, 2008:364). Japan-Australia strategic fit includes among others, components of a democratic liberal system, free market economy and commitment to upholding human rights, shared interests in criticizing the protective structure of marine communication lines, combating terrorism and safeguarding regional stability in the South Asia and South-Pacific, production of raw materials by Australia and Japan's need of raw materials for production of electronic devices and more importantly, having a shared, powerful ally in the US (Tow & Kersten, 2012:119). The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation enjoy strategic fit at different levels and areas which could be categorized as regional and international.

The way Iran and Russia view the world order is their primary ground for international strategic fit. This could be addressed in the framework of power polarization, power entities and trends influencing the international system. The way both countries view the power polarization, opposing a unipolar order and US uniaxial behavior is the common denominator of both countries. In terms of power entities, both countries oppose tendencies which are aimed at generation of new entities with exclusionary attitudes. Both Tehran and Moscow are not interested in globalization of West-oriented security and its associated entities. Finally, when it comes to trends influencing the international system, Iran and Russia have jointly opposed the employment of trends which are not part of the international law for deciding on major issues such as armed conflicts and peace in the international system (Sajjadpour, 2017:18). International sanctions are another point of international arena. Crimean accession to the Russian Federation in 2014 which prompted international sanctions on Russia by the US and the Europe conjured the feelings of a common destiny

with Iran in Russia. In particular, the adoption of *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (H.R.3364) by their common antagonist i.e. the US, has driven the two countries closer than ever. Iran proved that a country can live under sanctions and show growth in gross domestic product, even when actual development is in deep stagnation. Moscow has long tried to capture something useful from Iran's experience of living under sanctions despite differences in their economic structures (Sveshnikova, 2017). Obviously, Iran welcomes the creation of a new axis of resistance against international sanctions. Countering NATO's expansion to the East and the borders of two countries in Eurasia and the Middle East and extending efforts to restrict such trends is another internationally common view of both countries.

Syrian crisis is the first and most important factor in regional strategic fit of both countries. Iran has the upper hand in ground military operations while Russia is in control of the sky and provides air support thanks to its mighty air force. For this, Iran's influence on the grounds matters to Russia and Russian air support is crucial for Iran. Iran's role appears to be more influential since Russia does not have many boots on the grounds and the ground operations is of critical importance in Syrian front (Ford, 2017). Furthermore, the Middle East intellectual and normative structures demands special requirements for long-term durability and influence which Russia lacks. Therefore, Iran's soft power in the Middle East is crucial to increasing Russian presence in this region. On the other hand, Russian international status as a permanent UNSC member provides relatively precious advantages for Iran in both military and political dimensions. Combating terrorism is another common regional interest of both countries. Both Iran and Russia have shared vulnerabilities to terrorism in their contemporary times; Russia has adjacent borders with Chechnya, North Caucasus and some parts of Central Asia and South Caucasus and so does Iran. Considering the strong presence of terrorist outfits in the Syrian war, the return of foreign fighters from Syria to North Caucasus and particularly Chechnya

seems potentially possible which could pose a severe security threat to Russia (Bøgeskov Eriksen, 2017:22). Both countries have already demonstrated in their security approaches that they tend to deal with threats in their places of origin before they are activated in their area of interests and thus they have arrived at a common interface in the Syrian crisis.

The last important factor in the strategic fit of the two countries is their reciprocal balancing roles at both regional and international levels. For 15 years, Iran had been searching for an ally in regional and international powers to defuse the anti-Iranian US plots. Russia has traditionally been the major, prominent candidate for playing this balancing role (Kozhanov, 2016:910). Iran-Russia has always been part of a bigger jigsaw covering a litany of various issues. One has been the state of Moscow's engagement with the West. Until 2012 in particular, Moscow's relations with Tehran tended to move in the opposite direction of Russian-US relations, with Russia leveraging its links with Iran to shape its relations with America (Geranmayeh, 2016:6). Also, at the regional level, Iran is seen as leverage for balancing Russia's relations with Arab states of the Middle East.

System Principles: The System principle is a series of common goals around which strategic partnership is built. As a matter of fact, this principle provides the *raison d'être* for the partnership. These (security) goals go beyond a certain action such as deterring or combating a hostile state, as with a conventional military alliance. Second, strategic partnerships, unlike alliances, are primarily 'goal driven' (positive) rather than 'threat-driven' (negative) alignments. Following from this, no enemy state is identified by the partnership as a 'threat', though the partnership may be concerned with joint security 'issue areas', such as proliferation or terrorism, for example. Third, strategic partnerships tend to be informal in nature and entail low commitment costs, rather than being enshrined in a formal alliance treaty that binds the participants to rigid courses of action, such as a mutual defense pact (Wilkins, 2010:123). For example,

in the Strategic Partnership Instrument between Russia and South Africa, the system principles is expressed in form of,

a more just system of international relations based on sovereign equality of all states and peoples and supremacy of the law under the central role of the United Nations Organization, the successful functioning of the universal system of collective security based on the UN Charter, opposing US unilateralism and enhanced friendship of the two countries (Gelgenhuys, 2015:127).

Although the US plays an undeniable role in the system principles of any strategic partnership, one should not reduce this principle to countering US interests and goals in the Syrian crisis. Rather, this principle expands into a profound, comprehensive concept.

It should be noted that the US is currently the single pole of the international system and the sole global hegemonic power. Thus, countering the US measures does not constitute confronting a government or a state. As a matter of fact, it is confronting a part of the international system. For Kenneth N. Waltz, the primary post-inception function of structures is influencing the interacting units, something that takes place through social acceptance and institutionalization of norms and competitions (Vaezi and Moshir Zadeh, 2015: 137-38). Therefore, countering the US in the Syrian crisis is not just engaging a state. Rather, it is engaging an international order and a series of actors. Furthermore, the US measures consistently take the shape of a coherent, structured order which drives structural determinants for actors. Popular uprising in the Middle East led to the collapse of Post-Cold war order instituted by the US in the region and propelled the ongoing formation of a new order. Accordingly, the key, crucial aspect of Iran-Russia strategic partnership should primarily be countering the new order that is being conceived in this strategic region for re-consolidation of the US hegemonic structure. In the second place, the incorporation of the desired components of both countries in this new order constitutes the system principles and *raison d'être* of Iran-Russia strategic partnership in the region. Both countries

naturally seem to completely concur with the first aspect with negligible differences. However, they have disagreements when it comes to the second aspect i.e. formation of a new order. While Iran seeks to complete and buttress the axis of resistance in the new Middle East order, Russia intends to revive its influence in the region to both upgrade its international status and achieve geopolitical, security and economic interests in the Middle East. Therefore, it is just the informal nature of their strategic partnership and lack of commitments on both sides to the other's goals and actions that could lay the groundwork for sustained synergies of the both countries and the wider Eurasia via creation a common denominator in their goals, values and interests.

II. Unique Characteristics

As noted earlier, strategic partnership is a phenomenon that is fed by a certain theme and could exhibit certain functions and characteristics under different circumstances. In view of the historical-structural specifications of the Islamic Republic of Iran - the Russian Federation relations, the unique characteristics of this strategic partnership could be described as follows:

1. Although a theme-based concept, strategic partnership requires some general prerequisites and infrastructures. Since the required infrastructures are not there, Iran-Russia strategic partnership is in the feasibility and formation stages and thus it is too early to discuss the mechanisms of implementation and results of this model (evaluation and implementation) in Iran-Russia relations.

2. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a regional power while the Russian Federation is an international force. Therefore, Iran-Russia communications are different at regional & international bilateral levels. Only their relations at the regional level could be properly dubbed a strategic partnership (Karami, 2017: 29) as the region acts as the interface of two countries' communications, interests and actions. However, it should be noted that although Iran and Russia's strategic partnership has a regional span, its

outcomes and consequences are global on scale.

3. The concept of “strategic” in Iran-Russia strategic partnership currently falls in the domain of “strategic action” and will extend to “cooperation in strategic fields” (Eurasia, transit, economy) in future.

4. The “informal nature” and “low commitment costs” play a bold role in Iran-Russia strategic partnership which may gain further weight on certain occasions. Israel is the most important issue in this regard. Although Israel cannot play the role of a strategic partner for Russia due to its records and historical background (Razoux, 2008:2), its carries strategic benefits for Russia as more than one million Russian Jews are living in Israel as well as the fact that Israel forms an integral part the triad of Russia-the US- Israel (Bar, 2003:4). For this, Russia has entered into cooperation with Iran to secure Israel’s security. On the other hand, Iran’s principal reason for involvement in the Syrian crisis has been protection of the Axis of Resistance to contain Israel and guarantee its own security. This marks Israel as the value interface of both countries. As the pragmatic side of the strategic partnership gains momentum, this discrepancy could be diluted, something that calls for a smart balance. This also applies to Saudi Arabia subject to putting some other characteristics into consideration. This cooperation forms not a pragmatic partnership, but a strategic one according to the criteria proposed by Wilkins and Czechowska.

III. Cooperation Fields

Iran and Russia entered into a strategic partnership in response to their shared concerns in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. These concerns were addressed in the formative, essential principles of strategic partnership i.e. environmental uncertainty, strategic fit and systems principles. It was mentioned that the concept of “strategic” in Iran-Russia strategic partnership currently falls in the domain of “strategic action” (in the Syrian crisis). The leaders of both states have clearly demonstrated that

they wish to pass through the formation stage to the “implementation” phase. There have been frequent exchanges of economic and political delegations between the countries during which new structures, entities and approaches have been engendered as the facilitators of implementation mechanisms of action in strategic fields. For the first time, Russia has mentioned Iran in its Foreign Policy Document (Para 94) with all-round cooperation development with Iran as part of it (the Concept of Foreign Policy in Russian Federation, 2016:27). The countries have also signed numerous strategic documents in political, legal, security, economic and cultural fields, hoping that these fields construct the foundations for a new regional order for the future.

Although opposing the imposed order of the US was the *raison d'être* of Iran- Russia strategic partnership in a sense, both countries had a glance at inception of their own desired order. For this aim, re-defining the regional security of the Middle East is the first indispensable step in this way. Both Iran and Russia believe that the US interventionist measures have contributed to regional instability and insecurity, emergence of terrorist groups and terrorism in wider sense, drug trafficking, overthrow of states, installing new ruling elites and outbreaks of conflicts and clashes among countries, etc.. These new sources of insecurity jeopardize the security and interests of both Iran and Russia. Thus both countries seek a new security structure based on international law and honoring the sovereignty of states without instigating domestic and proxy wars. Combating the origin of security crises such as takfiri terrorism, failed states, energy security, drug trafficking and organized crimes are at the core of Iran-Russia security cooperation in the new order.

With regards to economy, creation of an economic pattern resistant to the US sanctions and the West has been the most important field of Iran-Russia cooperation. To this end, both countries have considered ditching US dollar from their transactions, starting new companies and economic structures and establishment of direct financial channels etc. Russia wishes to

utilize Iran's experience as a country with decent economic growth under prolonged sanctions extending several decades. Iran, in return, wants to enjoy the comparative economic advantages of Russia such as its financial and technological resources. Regarding transit, the two countries have adopted important, strategic measures for revival of the North-South corridor. Thanks to the unique geopolitical position and access to appropriate ground transportation infrastructures, Iran plays a key role to this corridor. In addition to offering numerous economic benefits to both countries (Iran in particular), this corridor provides a response to the components of the US order in creation of East-West transit routes, in particular in energy fields.

IV. Economic Ties

Economic ties are one the most important factors in consolidation and deepening of strategic partnership. Although economic issues have not been covered in the most important or the key articles of various strategic partnership documents (in contrast to systemic components of the international system or security concerns), they could be deemed as the most frequently discussed issues in interstate discussions. For instance, the Russia- SA Strategic Partnership Document mentions economic issues in 7 out of the total 13 fields, resulting in conclusion of scores of MoUs¹ and contracts between these two countries (Geldenhuys, 2015:133-134). This has been bolder in strategic partnership documents drafted between the EU and China. Even value-centered and security components have been placed within strategic partnership ties including cooperation in fields of transit, energy, financial & banking transactions or economic concepts such as free market and economic and trade liberalism.

From such perspective, in spite of the fact that Iran-Russia strategic partnership has advanced to the "formation phase" on account of geopolitical and security requirements and necessities

1. Memorandum of understanding

of the both countries, the key to its consolidation and stabilities lies in no field other than economic ties. In contrast to security and political interests of states which quickly change in response to covert or overt arrangements and unpredictable field developments, economic ties are remarkably durable, more stable in nature. Speculation on possible scenarios for the future of Iran-Russia relations after the resolution of Syrian crisis has been a central theme in discussions of the current Iran and Russia cooperation in Syria. Assuming that Assad's government relatively defuses all the threats, even the most optimistic analysts may not foresee the prevailing of Iran-Russia commonalities over their disagreements on Syria. These disagreements may become particularly challenging with the post-war economic involvement of China in Syria as the third side of Russian strategic triangle (UCF, 2016). In view of their less desirable economic ties in post-USSR collapse period, Russia and China have gone in a mad scramble to lay the grounds for such cooperation.

The total of Iran-Russia trade volume was around 16 billion USD from 2010 to the end of 2016; this indicates less than 3 billion USD per year regardless of ups and downs in economic transactions. Compared to Iran's annual trade of 32 billion USD with China, 9 billion USD with India, 6 billion USD with the Republic of Korea and 5 billion USD with Turkey, this reveals poor economic ties between Iran and Russia. Furthermore, the skewed trade balance of the two countries could also seriously compromise such ties. This balance was remarkably lopsided in favor of Russia from 2010 to 2016 with Iran mainly playing the role of an importer. Table 1 displays the volume of economic transactions from 2010 to 2016 between Iran and Russia. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the large portion of Iran-Russia transactions took place in form of military and arms contracts which are not mentioned in economic indicators due to their classified nature. However, media reports significant figures and statistics regarding Iran's purchase of arms from Russia which points to the importance of defense industries in Iran-Russia

bilateral ties. In just one case, Victor Ozerov, the Chairman of the Russian Upper House of Parliament's Defense Committee, mentions 10 billion USD as one of the arms trade arrangements between Iran and Russia (Ozerov, 2016).

Table 1: Iran-Russia Economic Transactions (2010- 2016)

Year	Iran's Exports to Russia	Russia's Export to Iran	Total Volume of Economic Exchanges	Iran's Trade Balance Ratio
2016	1880	302	2182	0.16
2015	1020	250	1270	0.24
2014	1330	341	1671	0.25
2013	1170	417	1587	0.35
2012	1900	410	2310	0.21
2011	3260	337	3597	0.10
2010	2790	304	3094	0.10

Source of data: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/irn>

Given such circumstances, the policy-makers and elites of both countries have designated bilateral economic ties as their second priority (after defense-security cooperation). Drafting economic visions in various fields (such as the roadmap for 5-year joint trade-industrial cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation, an MoU between Customs Administrations of Iran and Russia on Green Customs Corridor, an MoU for development of infrastructural cooperation etc) and conclusion of contracts and MoUs at macro national levels between states, corporations as well as among states and provinces is a clear testimony of this. Of the most important contracts signed between the two countries, one can mention a 30 billion USD contract in the field of energy, a finance arrangement between 4 Iranian banks and Eximbank of Russia, a contract worth of 3 billion USD for joint production of train cars (wagons), contracts for building two new nuclear plants in Iran, a contract for purchase of 12 SSJ100s, a contract between Gazprom and Iran NIGC for LPF production, Inter-bank loan arrangements, Iran's contract with Russia Helicopters and contracts for manufacturing of electrified railroads which could transform their bilateral economic ties. Organizing numerous joint economic commissions of the two countries to enhance the ties and removing the barriers in their economic exchanges coupled with activation of the trade

counseling sections of the diplomatic missions on both sides demonstrate the firm resolves of the both parties to bridge the most important gap in Iran-Russia strategic partnership.

Conclusion

From 2010 onwards, the Islamic Republic of Iran - the Russian Federation's relations have undergone changes in the wake of the developments of the Syrian Crisis and other regional and international developments such as expansion of Takfiri terrorism, the Ukrainian Crisis and the conclusion of the JCPOA. Accordingly, these new relations have changed in terms of level, depth, components, propositions, motives and drivers, values, interests and means, taking on a new structure in the transformation process. This has made it impossible to fathom and analyze the new relations within the frameworks of traditional, narrowed patterns of their bilateral relations. Strategic partnership as new pattern in inter-state relations lends itself to explanation in a much more straightforward manner thanks to its unique characteristics. Strategic partnership as a theme-based pattern of inter-state relations indicates high levels of relations between the two states. The informal nature of this partnership which lowers the commitment costs, its legal-political flexibility and the specific environment of its birth have distinguished it from alliance, coalition, partnership and cooperation patterns. In a pattern presented to explain the theoretical foundations of strategic partnerships in three steps of formation, implementation and assessment, Thomas Wilkins points to environmental uncertainty, strategic fit and system principles as three essential, important criteria in formation of strategic partnership.

Iran-Russia convergence in the environment of uncertainty introduced by popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa from 2010 which led to the collapse of the old order and is in transition to a new order is noted for the first criterion. Regarding the second criterion or strategic fit, Iran and Russia concur on shared views on the global order and opposing the US

unilateralism, the imposition of international sanctions, NATO expansion processes, the reciprocal balancing functions of two countries, the complementary role of comparative political-security advantages in Syrian Crisis and finally a common view on regional stability and fighting terrorism. As far as system principles is concerned, opposing the US imposed order and shaping the components of their desired order could be noted in Iran-Russia strategic partnership. It is again noted that Iran-Russia strategic partnership is in the “formation phase” and solely viable at regional levels. In spite of their disagreements and interfering factors such as Israel, the informal nature of Iran-Russia strategic partnership gains further importance. To securer maximum benefits and enhance the influence indicators of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the followings items are suggested:

✓ In international relations literature, strategic partnership is a new pattern in inter-state relations. It is a theme-based pattern which demands special coordinates for each country and under variable circumstances. Therefore, Iranian researchers and professionals on international relations should conduct extensive research on the dimensions of this new pattern along with its outcomes and functions.

✓ Iran-Russia strategic partnership is in incipient stages of its formation. Its continuation and completion thus entails development of stabilizing mechanisms in Iran-Russia relations. This requires the vigilance of policy-making bodies to be able to maintain, replace if necessary upgrade the available tools and propositions in prospective conditions of regional and international developments.

✓ Once formed, strategic partnership moves to the implementation stage which requires appropriate political-legal infrastructures to enable reaping the benefits of partnership. Economic fields in particular demand more concerted, tactful measures. On the other hand, the informal nature of strategic partnership results in emergence of grey areas in boundaries of the bilateral actions of both countries. This calls for employment of

controlling tools in different fields to secure interests.

✓ Strategic partnership is a dynamic, non-static process which could be upgraded to comprehensive or special strategic partnership (Mir Fakhraei, Rahimi, Sefidi Kassin, 2018:175). This requires transition from strategic action to cooperation in strategic fields. Therefore, functional enhancement of fields of cooperation to acceptable economic and cultural levels using novel tools of public diplomacy as well as geographical expansion of the strategic partnership to cover Eurasia could be a viable option for the policy-makers of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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