



Changing Dynamics in Old Rivalry: Russia-Iran Revitalization and US Interests in Middle East

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Structure of international system is substantially anarchic, and in this anarchic system power is the currency of international politics dwarfing overwhelmingly all the other pillars. The structure of international system bludgeons states to forge the alliances to balance the power of adversary. In the system of international politics Central Asian nations are truly searching for their niche. A landlocked region amid two regional powers China and Russia. US interests are basically strategic-oriented. All other interests are of secondary mould. In a regional geographical context, the interests of the US are overlapping with China and Russia. Despite China and Russia differences both have cordial ties against US interests. Moscow and Beijing cooperate in the economy, energy, combating terrorism, and preservation of Central Asian regimes. China and Russia consider the presence of the US in Central Asia as a threat to their regional security. Currently, the interests of the US are being balanced by China and Russia partnership. Central Asian regimes are not in the favor of US presence in the region. The US is losing its interests due to combat operations in Afghanistan and not reorienting its policies to cope with the challenges of the new millennium.



Introduction

The notion of rivalry can simultaneously be applied to elaborate a variety of dynamics between states, quite expansively and inexactly. For example, it intends to utmost estrangement and competition refers to skepticism with the possibility of strife or harbingers possible competitiveness between actors. Among state rivalries, there is difference between strategic conflicts and other protracted conflicts. The natures of this strife are characterized by highly competition among states in which states considered each other's as threat to their national interests. Michael et al. (2007) The start of particular strategic rivalries is much complex and heterogeneous. Such conflicts can emerge due to primeval disputes over territory. The origin of these conflicts can be tracked in variety of domestic problems which indulge the hostile policies of a ruling party towards a specific state. Moreover, it also includes the hostility or perception of specter towards a historic enemy. They may be bludgeoned or intensified by positional factors through which the competition of states is for comparative regional or international clout for the procurement of maximum interests (Freeman, 2017).

International politics keeps on changing radically. In Post-Cold War Era United States has miserably failed to transform the world from bi-polar system of Cold War to uni-polar system. In contrast to this, incumbent international relations have been shaped as multi-polar relations. In this multi-polar world, US is losing its clout on the globe. United States and other Western countries are in omnipotent quest to unravel emerging problems. The countries like Iran and Russia are playing vital role in molding new world order. Iran and Russia along with other powers those have stakes and frequently faced ignorance by US are important in shaping international order. The courters of multi-polar world are in the favor of forming a coalition to address the problems of rapidly changing international environment. They have the view that international order should be in lined with the norms of international institutions. The transition of international system towards multi-polarity is in the phase of transition. Major states those are in the favor of multi-polar word are active in the formulation of future world order. Actors those are in the favor of uni-polarity are certainly getting deprived of their position because they asses inaccurate not their own capabilities, but also the proficiencies of others. In the phase of transition, a state needs to assess the features of transitional phase which needs comprehensive planning by heeding on gains and weakness of their own policies and also on other hand. In shaping multi-polar world order regions always play vital role. There is great interconnectedness between region and globe in which key international actors get opportunities from both sides. It is because of the reason that contemporary and emerging regional and interregional partnerships are becoming a key phenomenon in the phase of change from a bipolar to a multipolar world. In this context cooperation between Iran and Russia with other Middle Eastern countries gains prominence. The activities between two states are escalating in multiple spheres of regional policy (Bakare, 2021).



Theory of Regional Security Complex

In Regional security complex, the regions are the parts of different states or other units whom main procedure of securitization and de-securitization or sometime both are very interconnected. The problems of their security cannot be separately evaluated or settled by separating its different parts. They are determined by enduring forms of friendship and hostility. In simple words, perceptions of security and insecurity lay down at the core of regional formations of order (Santini, 2017).

In regional security complex, there are long standing patterns of friendship and enmity involving regions, geographically lucid form of security interdependence. In regional level of security complex there is the involvement of specific features which includes long lasting hostilities, mutual culture from civilizations. On regional level the foundation of RSCs' can be track in the interactions between anarchic structure and the consequences of its balance of power, and on other side the pressures of closeness of local geography. In simple states those have close border link have more security interaction in compare with the states those are located in different regions. The notion that powers works on regional level can be well understand from the concept of regional balance of power in which the power which is not interconnected one another is participating in similar system of relations. Therefore, the international system which includes different subsystems can be scrutinized in relation with polarity like uni-polarity, bi-polarity, tri-polarity and multi-polarity. Therefore, it is crucial to separate regional power from international power (Buzan & Waver, 2003). The anarchic nature of international system and its long effects married regional states those are interdependent in term of security.

Superpowers operate on global level with vast interests and immense competencies through which they are able to conduct the enmity on larger scale. On the other hand, states those have limited power and capability bound their interests with nearer state. Through this small power or powers with limited capacity can mutually refine their power. Small powers commonly locked themselves into regional RSC with bordering or neighboring states. Super power typically intervenes in the regions because they have interests in the whole world (Buzan & Waver, 2003).

On regional security complex, a cluster of states whom primary security matters are highly inter-linked so tightly in a sense that their national securities cannot sensibly be viewed separated from each other's. However, there are pragmatic and mutual interests exists between Iran and Russia. It is evident that vital security issues exist between Iran and Russia at the same time. With regard to Middle East, Iran and Russia hold common geopolitical perceptions i.e., preventing US supremacy in the affairs of world, promoting what the Moscow and Tehran the concept of multipolar world and US policy to sideline or blockade any one of Moscow or Tehran (Shaffer, 2001).

Principle Underlying Russia's Foreign Policy towards Iran and Middle East

Russia and Middle Eastern states have good bi-lateral relations. Over last few years, dynamic changes have been observed in Russia's policy towards Middle East. After the collapse of Soviet Union, the importance of Middle East is increased for Russia. In Middle East, Russia increased its



footprints in the field of security. It had sold arms to different Middle Eastern States when United States had refused. The focus of Russian policy towards Middle East was to balance US interests in the region (Alterman, 2017). After the collapse, Russia looks toward the West with hostility. In Middle East, any Western attempt to change the status quo of any state is opposed by Russia and it emphasized on the respect of sovereignty of all nations. A sudden shift was seen in Russia foreign policy was seen when Putin get the control of office. Russia under Putin restore its image as resurging power in the world (Borshchevskaya, 2016). In the early years of Putin presidency Russian policy was found more nationalistic and anti-American. After Collapse of Soviet Union, the presence of Russia in Middle East is unique for the region. Russia and major countries of the region interact politically and diplomatically through high level of delegations. In political terms, Russia is new potential partner for most of states in the region because they consider it as an alternative of US capitalists' ideology and counterweight to the US in regional presence. The continuing tension between Russia and US in the first five years of new millennium provide ground for the improvement of Russia and Iran relations. In new millennium the signs of improvement in Russia-Iran relations were observed in Putin and Mohammad Khatami meeting in 2000 which was held in Washington. After this development in 2000, Russia withdraws from its agreement concluded with US in 1995 regarding committing any agreement related to armament (Kozanov, 2012). In 2001, visit of Iranian President to Russia set the grounds for the revitalization of Russia-Iran constructive relationship. In the same year, Putin restore its arms supply to Iran. Moreover, Russia and Iran announced that Russia will provide assistance regarding the development of Iran's nuclear program and restore its work on Bushehr nuclear plant (Katz, 2002). The key factor behind Moscow foreign policy towards Middle East and Iran was Washington. Moscow and Tehran faced different set of circumstances.

The tension between US and Russia relations become the cause of Russia and Iran rapprochement. The incident of 9/11 subsequently improved relations between US-Russia and US-Iran which slow down the interaction between Russia and Iran. In 2003, US invasion in Iraq were opposed by both Russia and Iran and both were dissatisfied from this invasion. After US invasion, Moscow improved its ties not only with the partner of former Soviet Union but also revisited its policies to other countries. (Kozanov, 2012). Subsequently, other than US there are different factors in Middle East those are uniting Russia and Iran. Economically, the sanctions of US on Russia and Iran economy, politically both are avoiding complete political situation and spreading their wings outside the regions, and finally reducing different potent security threats posed by the US and security situation of Middle East. It seems that Russia is in the search of strong position in Middle East by developing cordial relations with all nations and mainly with Iran.

Russia and Iran Relations

Iran's geostrategic importance at Russia Southern border had played a crucial role in the promotion of their mutual interests. At the same time, Iran is intra-regional state which has vital position among Middle East, Caucasian and Central Asian region. In international politics, Iran has a



significant military position due to his location. Moscow and Tehran have been developing strong geopolitical relations based on political, economic, strategic and regional cooperation. Russia and Iran bi-lateral ties in Middle East are as following.

Political Relations

Moscow and Tehran are enjoying political relations due to close regional proximity. This regional advantage allows Russia and Iran to share broader prospective of their political relations. On political grounds different commissions and delegations exchange their visits with the objectives of developing cordial ties. The boost in bi-lateral political ties were observed when Putin took the control of the office. In 2000, Putin and Khatami released a statement after the meeting in UN.

“We share a lot of interests with Russia ... I believe the two countries can engage in a viable and strong relationship ... A stronger relationship would allow both countries to marginalize external powers that are seeking destructive ends and which do not belong in the region.”

Political relations between Moscow and Tehran have been upgraded after this joint statement. On political grounds both Moscow and Tehran have faced political sanctions due to the problem of Russia expansion towards Ukraine and Iran nuclear program. United States policy of ‘victim’ brought consensus on many issues between two states. (Dutkiewicz & Kozhanov, 2016). Political convergence has been developed as Russia supported Iran in the development of its nuclear program. Moreover, Russia also supported Iran’s entry as observer in SCO (Kozhanov, 2012). In line with this both have common view on US stance towards Syria. Russia and Iran have cooperated regarding the preservation of Syrian regime. Both states considered US stance as a threat not only to the sovereignty of Syria but also to their own national interests. The factor behind Moscow and Tehran support to Syrian regime was the rivalry with the West (Kozhanov, 2012). In October 2011 Russia veto US backed resolution in UNSC which showed that Russia has interests in the region. (Lynch, 5 October 2011). Both were in the favor to save Syrian regime and stop US from attacking on Syria. Russia and Iran have supported Assad regime against the regime change supported by US. Russia along with China opposed resolution in United Nations regarding imposing sanctions on Syrian regimes. Syria has remained closer to Russia and showed hostile attitude towards US. Russia considered that the downfall of Russian regime would give benefit to US and Saudi Arabia and will hurt Russian interests in the region. After US deal with Iran, Russian were more concerned regarding the prospects of diminishing Russian role in Iran. This nuclear deal disturbed bilateral relations but President Putin gave special importance to Russia and Iran bilateral relations despite of differences (Katz, 2012). In 2017, after the visit of Hassan Rouhani to Russia interpreted by the Western states as signs of strengthen bilateral ties. During these two days visit discussions regarding energy, trade, economy and investment in nuclear sector were the part of political discussion. In addition, different complex and issue of mutual distrust were also the part of agenda. (Abedin, 2017).



Economic and Energy Relations

At the dawn of 21st Iran and Russia have involved economy to boost their already developed relations. At the beginning with gradual improvements in domestic economy Russian producers has increased the exports of the country. As a result, from 2000 to 2006 the annual volume of Russia and Iran trade was increased from \$686.9 million to \$2.2 billion. The graph of bilateral trade grows continuously in the subsequent years till the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009. Iran imports from Russia were based on ferrous metals, metallurgical products, pulp, wood, paper, cereals and fertilizer. On other side Russia imports from Iran were food, agricultural related item and automobiles. Till 2010 the total trade volume between two countries was recorded \$30.5 million. Iran's investments in the economy of Russia were recorded \$3.1 million, in which \$608,000 was only foreign direct investment. Subsequently, businessmen of Russia invested \$27.4 million in Iran in which \$27.1 million in FDI. The investors of China and Russia focused on whole sale and retailer trade which also include household products, automobile (Kozhanov 2012). In 2007, Iran and Russia transformed their economic ties into strategic partnership. Russia was interested to dramatically upgrade bilateral trade based on systematic relations. In the same year Russian economists were believing that in 2018 bilateral trade would increase hundred times and reached \$ 200 billion. Presidents of both countries agreed to enhance economic and trade relations to support energy which suffer due to the result of sanctions (Belobrov, 2014). Iran considers that economic is an important factor through which both countries can run peaceful bilateral relations.

Russia-Iran Trade Relations (2007 to 2011) in Million Dollars

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Exports	2958	3335	2766	3359	3272
Imports	349	401	212	272	342
Trade Turnover	3307	3736	2978	3631	3614

Source: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 2012

According to the table, from 2007 to 2011 the volume of the annual trade was \$3.1 billion. Their economic trade went down and reached \$2.9 in 2009 due to economic recession. In 2012, there was another decline and bilateral trade was calculated \$2.33 billion. This was recorded 38 percent down than in 2011. There was no problem in their trade relationship. The problem persists due to international sanctions on Iran due to which demand lashes which affected trade ties. To support trade between Iran and Russia both sides promoted energy cooperation in their ties. Russia has supported Iran on Bushehr reactor is a flag ship program of Iran-Russia energy cooperation. Russia is interests to work more on Iranian energy related projects. Putin is interested in energy generated



projects those give economic benefits. Russia is interested the construction of rail link via Azerbaijan and Iran to gain access towards Persian Gulf (Hutcheson, 2002). In energy perspective, Iran is the vital partner of Russia. After Russia, Iran has world's second largest natural gas reserves. Similarly, Iran is second largest oil reserves after Saudi Arabia. Due to Iran's oil and gas reserves Russia is coordinating with Iran in exporting its energy reserves for economic gains. There is strong conflict between US and Russia over Iran and competition over energy reserves which cannot be ignored. Russia and Iran are in the favor of developing strong bilateral energy and economic ties and do not want to lose their strong foothold in the Middle East (Islam, 2013).

Military and Armament Cooperation

Russia and Iran are enjoying military ties. Contemporary, Iran is third largest buyer of Russian arms. Russia has increased its arms supply to Iran when West stopped all kind of military assistance. Russia transferred different advanced arms with equipment to fulfill the demand of Iran's military (Blank, 1996). After China and India, Iran is the third largest buyer of Russian arms. Russian's experts already assist Iran in launching his first satellite (Marcin Kaczmarek, 15 April 2009). Russia has developed cooperation with Iran in upgrading its local military industry base. Igor Sergeev as first Defense Minister after 1979 visited Iran in 2001 to discuss arms supply amounted more than \$ 3 billion. During early years of Putin administration different agreements with the worth of \$2 and \$7 related to arms supply were signed between Iran and Russia (Freedman, 2006). In 2005, So far Iran has concluded an arms agreement with Russia which includes system of air defense 29 Tor-M1 with the worth of 1 billion US dollar. Moreover, MiG 29, Su-25 aircraft Mi-171 helicopters and air radars have been supplied by Russia. (Aleksandr Golts. 6 December 2005). According to the calculations of senior US officials, official reports and independent research Iran is working on the delivery systems of Ballistics Missile and WMDs which includes chemical, nuclear and biological weapons. Among all these weapons, Iran has more progressed in the field of Ballistics Missiles. Different Russian companies some time with assistance of Russian government and sometimes illicitly have played vital role in the advancement of Iran's armaments (Shaffer, 2001. P. 69). Rater on in 2015 Moscow and Tehran signed an agreement regarding the expansion of military relations and developed consensus to resolve the dispute regarding the sale of air defense system to Iran. After the agreement, Defense Minister of Russia Sergei Shoigu said that this agreement will enhance cooperation on counter-terrorism and exchange of high military officials for training purpose between both nations. Similarly Iranian



defense minister Hossein Dehqan said that there is understanding between both regarding US global strategy and its interference in domestic and global affairs and need to cooperate regarding the interference of US forces in the region (Russia and Iran Sign Deal to Widen Military Cooperation) (Shaffer, 2001). To enhance furthermore their relations both nations also cooperated in the field of nuclear development.

Nuclear Cooperation

Russia and Iran had developed nuclear cooperation on the larger level in which Russia is cooperation with Iran in the development of its nuclear program. Russia considers its nuclear cooperation with Iran as legitimate and in accordance with the safeguards of IAEA. Since 1979, after Iranian revolution Russia helped Iran in the development of nuclear when US stopped all sort of cooperation. A boost in nuclear cooperation was observed after the fall of Soviet Union and Iran purchased different weapons from Russia. In the end of 1990, Iran showed its willingness to cooperate with Iran in the development of nuclear weapons. A joint research organization was formed by Russia to assist Iran in which Russia provided nuclear experts and technical support to Iranian nuclear program (Tabarani, 2008). To support nuclear industry Iran is importing nuclear energy from Russia. Since 1995, At most export a Russian company has been working on Iran's Bushehr Nuclear power plant. According to the 2005 agreement fuel to the power plant will be provided by Russia and it will collect its once used oil. The power plant has started its work and Russia also provide training to Iranian. In 2008, under the supervision of IAEA Russia have provided 82 tons fuel to Iran's power plant and completed the installation of the plant. According to Moscow, this power plant will start working in August 2009 which cost was estimated around \$800 million (Kaczmariski, 2009). In December 2015, Moscow and Tehran signed a contract regarding the building of more reactors on Bushehr plant Southern Iran. In 2016, Moscow delivered the parts of S-300 system to Tehran (Ghoshal, 2016). Russia, however is in the search of ways to maneuver itself in Middle East through providing all sort of support and developing cordial relations with Iran. Russia is providing lucrative offers Iran and has established common foreign policy grounds in Middle East. This means Iran and Russia are facing same sort of threats



from Middle East. These threats have united both to form a unite strategy to counter them. In the view of many analysts, Russia needs a stable Iran, therefore it is cooperating not arguing with Iran. From Russia, Iran is a country with great ancient civilization, its strategic location has lot of potential, therefore Russia is actively engaging in Iran.

For Moscow, Tehran is playing positive role in the promotion of its interests in the Middle East. Russia cooperation with Iran on its nuclear program is as like US cooperation with North Korea. Moreover, on positive side Russia and Iran are cooperating in many fields. Despite many divergences both are agree that US influence in Middle East is a threat to their interests in Middle East.

Challenges to US Interests in the Region

Contemporary security of Middle East arouses certain questions regarding the changing role of regional and global powers which Russia, Iran and United States guaranteeing peace and managing crises. Russian policies towards Middle East are driven by a set of pragmatic considerations. Simultaneously, Russia was in the search of an ally to promote and secure its vital interests in the region. In this context, Iran was the only country which can cooperate with Russia because it was facing hostile environment due to nuclear program. In the regional dynamics US was the only state which was posing challenges to Iran and Russia's mutual interests. However, their strategic cooperation in international politics and regional proximity developing strong cooperation to face mutual challenges from US growing influence.

In Middle East, United States have variety of Interests which includes safety of friendly regimes, counter terrorism, maintain stable energy supply, protection of Human Rights and prevention from the spread of weapons of mass destruction etc. Primarily, US is more concerned in the security of Middle East because of its interests in the region. These security threats are looming large and continuing. Russia and Iran cooperation is undermining US interests in the region. Moscow and Tehran have the competency to spoil US interests in the region. In 2015, Russian forces intervined in Syria with the support of Iran to protect Assad regime. This act was not only a threat to US efforts of counterterrorism and promotion of democracy but also increased cooperation between Moscow and Tehran (Byman & Moller, 2016). In Middle East, Iran is questing for nuclear power. The argument of Iran is that its oil resources are running out so it is developing nuclear as



alternative. In simple, Iran will use its nuclear for peaceful means. This Iranian nuclear program is posing challenge to US interests in the region. US and other western states are against of spread of weapons of mass destruction. US considers that nuclear Iran will pose threats to other regimes in the region. In 1979, when US stopped all kind of support to Iran then Russia was the only country which openly supported Iran in nuclear development. At this moment, Russia's support to Iran on nuclear development is a headache for Western Powers.

The enmity with the US is based on religious and cultural motivations. Due to this any policy of US primarily and the West particularly seen by the regional countries with suspicion. In Middle East US has long history of conflicts with the states due which mostly regional states are not in favor of US. For regional states, Moscow has no history of such like US in the region but at the same time Moscow is also interested Middle Eastern energy. Moscow close regional proximity is to Middle East is giving an edge and challenging US interests in the region. (Beau & Troitskiy) In Middle East, Russia and Iran have bilateral strategic relations and perceived their relations very vital for their national security. In their relations both perceived that they are living in unipolar world in which all states have problems with United States. In this scenario if United States can develop cordial relations with any one of both than the bilateral relations between Iran will be dramatically change in the region. Russia and United States are not competing in every sphere of world there are possibilities that US will redefine its relations with Moscow if US and Iran relations will be improved. Moreover, there are certain areas like Afghanistan where the interests of US, Russia and Iran are complementary. United States need such type of cooperation to develop any comprehensive strategy. (Shaffer, 2012)

All these factors are complicating US policy towards Middle East and in near future it is unlikely to change. Despite of various challenges to US policy in Middle East, it cannot disengage itself from changing regional dynamics. Middle Eastern oil and its acquisition will remain an essential element for US and it will follow its interests regarding this in the region. As long as terrorism in the region is concerned, US and its activities will remain in danger. In this prevailing situation, the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran will increase because their security is collectively bound. There is an increased interdependence between both due to which their security factors cannot be separated from each other's.

Conclusion



Russia and Iran are spreading their muscles through close cooperation in the Middle East. Their cooperation is escalating due to the involvement of certain external elements. Such as Russia and Iran hostility with the West is catering grounds for joint collaboration. The strength in their bilateral relations mainly as marriage of convenience giving their mutual isolation from the west. Iran is facing economic sanctions due to not settlement of nuclear issue with US and their partners. In turn, the political authorities of Iran are in the favor of dialogues with those who are cooperating with them under sanctions. In this sense Russia and Iran are cooperating in economic, political and military spheres. In contemporary, Russia needs hard currency and to get economic benefits it is cooperation with Iran on the development of its nuclear program. However, United States is unhappy with Russia due to its growing collaboration with Iran. However, United States and Russia are not in the favor of any international conflict in the region. So to avoid conflicts, Russia is cooperating with US on some areas of confrontation. However, in Middle Eastern context there is cooperation among Russia, Iran and US like terrorism but there is the need of greater cooperation on mutual regional problems. Russia and Iran as regional while US is as extra-regional power must understand the problems of regional states. In addition there are issues of low intensity between Iran and Russia those can be resolved by adopting joint collaborative measures or by the involvement of any third party. Furthermore, Russia and Iran have to find the areas of more cooperation to make their relations more effective. However, geographical proximity is giving them additional benefits.

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