

Russia and Iran deepen political and military cooperation

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Against the background of continuing fighting in Syria, Russia and Iran have expanded their political and military relations significantly in recent months. The offensive led by the US and its allies in the Middle East, which has destabilised the entire region and threatens to spread to Russia and Iran, is driving both countries into an alliance.

Although Russia, in recent years, opposed preparations for war against Iran by the western allies, Moscow avoided any open orientation towards Tehran. Vladimir Putin, like his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, rejected invitations for an official state visit on several occasions. A deterioration in bilateral relations occurred in 2011, when then-President Dmitri Medvedev refused to supply the S-300 defence system to Iran, even though a contract had been agreed.

Russia and Iran are also competing in the Caspian region and Central Asia for economic and political influence. However, since the third presidency of Putin, amidst the intensification of war in Syria, there are indications of a shift in Russian-Iranian relations.

In 2012 the exchange of diplomatic delegations between both countries reached a high point of 170. Among these were a number of meetings between high-ranking government officials. A key issue in the meetings was collaboration on security issues in Central Asia, the Caucasus and above all in the Syrian crisis.

In January 2013, Vladimir Kolokoltsev became the first Russian interior minister to travel to Iran since 1979. Both countries agreed on a security pact, which includes the exchange of intelligence information on international issues. Moscow is also to support Teheran through the building of a 500,000-strong paramilitary unit modeled on the troops of the Russian interior ministry, which will be able to deal with domestic

unrest.

The two nations announced an agreement on cooperation in the building of new nuclear power stations in Iran. Nonetheless, economic relations between the two countries are limited. According to official figures, trade between the two was just \$3 billion in 2011, compared to \$100 billion between Russia and China and \$40 billion between China and Iran. Russian-Iranian trade fell 40 per cent last year to \$2 billion, not least as a result of the brutal economic sanctions spearheaded by the US and imposed by imperialist Europe and North America.

Both countries have expanded their cooperation in military matters, particularly in the Caspian Sea. At the end of June, high-ranking Iranian military officials announced plans for joint military exercises in the Caspian Sea during the second half of the year. According to the commander of Iran's northern fleet, the exercises took place from July 8-12, although there was no confirmation of this from the Russian side.

The first joint military exercises by Russia and Iran took place in the Caspian Sea in 2009. The Russian navy's participation was limited to only one ship, however, and the Russian army denied claims from Iranian officers that the actions amounted to joint military exercises in the strict sense of the term.

Last year, Russia and Iran significantly deepened the cooperation of their navies in the Caspian Sea, exchanging warships on several occasions. Admiral Gholam Reza Khadem Beqam of the Iranian navy announced, "We should expect this trend to be maintained, and more fleets to be sent to Russia."

The intensification of their military cooperation is the response of Russia and Iran to growing national tensions in the region. The interventions of the United States in the nearby Middle East and the war

preparations against Iran have dramatically sharpened the numerous conflicts between the states bordering the Caspian Sea in recent years.

Since 2011, Russia has strengthened its troops and naval forces stationed in the Caspian Sea, Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, and made the expansion of the Russian navy a centrepiece of the rearming of the military. Iran is likewise acting to strengthen its navy, and in March this year it stationed a Jamaran II long distance destroyer in the Caspian Sea for the first time.

Along with the growing danger of a military assault by the United States and Israel, Iran is also arming itself for potential conflicts with Azerbaijan and other neighbouring states over raw materials in the Caspian Sea. The legal situation over the demarcation of borders between the neighbouring states has been disputed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which has caused permanent conflicts over the ownership of deposits of raw materials.

The other states bordering the Caspian Sea have also massively upgraded their militaries in recent years. The expansion of the Azerbaijani navy was supported mainly by the United States and Israel.

In a comment entitled “The anti-NATO alliance in the Caspian Sea”, Vladimir Muchin of the liberal *Nezavizimaya Gazeta* wrote at the beginning of July, “Russia and Iran have a political interest in the area of national security and to resist outside influence in the Caspian Sea.”

Muchin warned that Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan were building military relations with NATO in the region. Both countries had made their harbours in Baku and Aktau available for the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan.

While Iran, which has been isolated on all sides by the United States, is seeking to build an alliance with Russia to keep control of the situation in Syria and arm itself in preparation for a threatened attack by the US and Israel, the Kremlin is attempting to avoid a conflagration across the region. Although there are sharp differences within the Russian ruling elite over closer alliances with China and Iran, the Kremlin’s foreign policy is currently determined by the fear of an explosion of the military and ethnic conflicts in the Middle East and the Caucasus.

Russian defence minister Dmitri Rogozin warned in January, “Should anything happen to Iran, should Iran

be drawn into any sort of political or military difficulties, it would be a direct threat to Russia’s national security.”

Andrei Arashev, the deputy director of the influential think tank Strategic Culture Foundation, wrote at the end of June that the intervention of US imperialism in central Asia and the Middle East endangered the territorial integrity of Russia, China and Iran.

Arashev therefore appealed for a “strategic alliance” between Iran and Russia: “The destruction of Arab states in the immediate vicinity of Iran and on the distant periphery of Russia and China, the perspective of a military intervention and the collapse of the (Syrian) state and the fall of Syria into chaos will have a direct impact on the national security of our countries. To put it another way, in order to prevent combat on the streets of Iran and then on Russian streets, we must stand on the side of our ally Syria.”



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