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## From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic: Iran's Struggle for Autonomy

This article examines the long-term dynamics of Iranian-Russian relations by situating contemporary interactions within a broader historical framework extending from the Qajar era to the Islamic Republic. Much of the existing literature analyzes bilateral relations primarily in the context of the Pahlavi period or the post-1979 regime. By contrast, this study argues that the pattern of cooperation and tension between Tehran and Moscow reflects a recurring geopolitical strategy rooted in Iran's historical struggle to preserve autonomy amid competing great powers. Drawing on historical analysis, the article demonstrates that Iran has consistently pursued a strategy of "negative balance," seeking to counter the influence of dominant external powers by leveraging rivalries among them. Beginning with the Russo-Persian wars of the nineteenth century, Iran's territorial losses and strategic vulnerability compelled its rulers to adopt pragmatic diplomatic strategies designed to preserve sovereignty despite structural weakness. During the Qajar period, Iran attempted to balance Russian influence by cultivating ties with Britain, while later regimes sought to offset Soviet power through closer relations with the US. After the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic articulated this approach through the doctrine of "Neither East nor West," reinforcing a pattern of cautious engagement with competing powers rather than alignment with any single patron. Although recent developments -including arms transfers, geopolitical coordination, and shared opposition to Western influence — have prompted some observers to describe Iran and Russia as strategic partners, this article argues that their relationship remains largely transactional. Historical grievances, divergent strategic interests, limited economic integration, and mutual suspicions constrain the emergence of a durable alliance. By placing current ties within a historical trajectory, this study shows that Iran's engagement with Russia is best understood not as a strategic partnership but as part of a broader strategy aimed at maintaining strategic autonomy in a competitive international system.

*Keywords:* historical analysis, Russia, Iran, relations, cooperation, conflict, historical trajectory, Western Powers, grievances, national interests.

### Introduction

A young Napoleon Bonaparte, then just an artillery captain, won his first battle at Toulon by recommending the Republican commander to reposition his batteries away from the city to the entrance of the bay. This was a counterintuitive move as the battery would now be out of range of the city which was being used to root out the Royalists. Yet, despite the contrarian military advice, the British naval commander who had moved his fleet in to support the Royalists in response to their plea for aid ordered a retreat. Upon seeing their means of escape—should they lose the battle—leaving, the Royalists immediately lost the will to fight and scrambled to get to the ships before they left. This all happened, oddly enough, even as the artillery batteries were no longer a threat to the Royalists. What caused the British commander to flee? He made the same calculation that the Royalist forces did, fearing his planned escape route would be shelled by the repositioned batteries if they lost the battle. Both reacted from the fear of what might happen if they lost without considering how the repositioning actually lowered the likelihood of defeat [1; 156].

Militarily this is a small battle however important for placing Napoleon on his path to power. So why start with it? That man of small stature cast a long shadow over the Middle East, more broadly, and over Russian-Iranian relations in particular. Even more importantly, it presents a vivid metaphor to capture the dynamic of the Great Game in the 19th century between Russia and the British as they struggled for dominance in the territory on either side of the Caspian Sea.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Caspian Sea, which is actually the largest lake in the world, has been historically a strategic location since it comprises Eurasia where the East has met the West and the Silk Road Caravans traveled for centuries. In the modern era, the Caspian basin includes both the Central Asian steppes on its east shores and the Caucasus on its western shores. For more information see, Shamsdoulatabadi, S. M. R. 2009. "A Theoretical Analysis of the Caspian Region." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 62-89.

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The British commander and the Royalist defenders at Toulon manifested their fears by basing their decision on the possibility rather than the likelihood of defeat given the artillery batteries were placed out of range just as London allowed Moscow drive its relations with Iran by playing on its anxiety over losing India, the Jewel of the British Empire [2; 937]. As science fiction author Frank Herbert put forth in his most famous work, *Dune*,<sup>2</sup> “Fear is the mind killer. The little death that brings total obliteration” [3; 5]. We aim to avoid that trap by situating Iran in its proper time and place in its centuries-long relations with Russia.

Past studies into Iran’s foreign policy typically cover only the Islamic Republic or back to the last shah before the 1979 revolution, Mohammad Reza Shah. Fewer look into the history going back to his father Reza Shah and to the Qajars. In fact, Only Rouhollah Ramazani’s *The Foreign Policy of Iran 1500–1941* [4] and his follow-up *Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1941-1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* [5] cover most of our period of interest rigorously. He observed Iran’s recurring theme of choosing “Neither East nor West,” and looking for a third force to serve to fulfill its negative balancing strategy upon which we elaborate below. We argue along that line and apply to understand the nature of Iran’s relations with Russia in that wider context. Many studies [6], [7], [8], [9], [10] come to a similar conclusion as ours, either implicitly or explicitly, that their relationship is a marriage of convenience, and not a strategic partnership. Yet, we have done so from a wider vantage point showing that the current state of affairs is not merely a product of the current state of affairs but a natural attractor due to consistent geopolitical interests.

### *Materials and Methods*

Several of the materials used in this research were obtained through online archival collections related to the nineteenth-century Qajar period in Iran, as well as twentieth-century Russian–Iranian sources available through the University of Central Florida Library system. The UCF Library serves as a repository for numerous international organization records and government documents, which provided additional historical and policy materials relevant to this study. These archival and documentary sources were analyzed to identify key historical events, patterns of interaction, and long-term developments shaping Iranian foreign policy toward Russia.

A geopolitical approach. Most people place Iran in the Middle East, an ambiguous label born of the Asia lying to the east of Europe. It made sense from the European’s vantage point to divide the former into the Far East, Middle East, and Near East [11]. Looking from above the surface, though, we see Iran located at the center of Central and Southwestern Asia, which itself bridges Africa, Europe, and Asia. Iran borders Turkey, on Europe’s periphery, the South Caucasus, and South Asia, with mountainous and swampy terrain, providing internal barriers strong enough to deter the US even at the height of its strength in the region [12; 169]. Iran’s location not only makes it an attractive partner but the linchpin in its desired multipolar world with a Russian-led Eurasian bloc to defy the Western bloc’s liberal norms. This is Russia’s dream. Yet, in the real world the basis for a strategic partnership is remarkably thin with minimal trade between them. Due to lack of investment, insufficient transcontinental infrastructure has prevented it from growing into a substantial relationship [13; 3].

Fulfilling this dream goes beyond the material needs of geopolitics and speaks to its inmost desire to claim its rightful place. Given their different starting points and checkered history, it might seem surprising to find Russia in the same boat with Iran, but both share a similar hope to reclaim lost glory. This shared hope does not a strategic partnership make as they have rather divergent issues as will show using prior historical studies. Moreover, that only concerns the setting for the current conditions, but with secondary sources we demonstrate that Iran has been here with European powers before.

The research method used in this project is historical analysis of event data. The study relies primarily on historical and documentary sources examining Iranian–Russian relations across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## *Results*

### *Historical background*

#### *From Qajar to Pahlavi Dynasty*

Iran’s history with the Russians goes back centuries to the Safavid Empire whose elites originated from the Ottomans with whom they also contended to the point where both aimed to partition it in its final years [14; 125].

<sup>2</sup>For those who are unfamiliar with this classic science fiction, in “*Dune*,” Frank Herbert deliberately tempers the technological aspects of this tale to illustrate how empires rise and fall owing to politics around a particular resource. See, Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Ace Books, 1965).

Yet, something happened in the late 1700s that qualitatively changed the nature of the rivalry. While they were at roughly the same level before, with the decades of advancements wrought by Peter the Great's reforms, Russia's military power increased sharply, especially in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. The difference in outcomes between the First Russo-Persian War (1805-1813) and the Second Russo-Persian War (1826-1828) illustrates that quantum leap in capability. Iran only lost its wealthy Caucasus provinces in what was already a disastrous defeat in the first conflict, but the defeat in the second one was so thorough that it imperiled the Qajar dynasty itself as Moscow forced a punitive peace on Tehran with the 1828 Turkmenachy Treaty. The terms of that treaty exacted reparations comprising an eighth of its treasury—not at the time of the signing—but at its zenith which had long-past. The Qajars would muddle through another century, but the catastrophic loss stripped them of their legitimacy at home and abroad, so they never saw their former strength renewed [15; 35].

He more than any other shaped Iran's foreign policy of containment in the aftermath of its wars with Russia. Before the Turkmenachy Treaty, Europeans treated Iran more as an equal, but afterwards that institutionalization of its subordination to Russia brought its status to that of a colonial possession and with the condescension commensurate to that station. Its sovereignty existed only on paper with Russia even having a hand in the Qajars' dynastic succession, though that was a concession to guarantee that Abbas Mirza, the reformer would ascend to the throne. His chief aid, Mirza Isa Farahani, also known as Mirza Bozog or Qa'im-maqam, persuaded the Russians that since his rivals' actions largely spawned the Second Russo-Persian War they would benefit from a more stable partner. Even after the monumental loss, the Qajars and wider Iranian culture still dreamed of restoring the greatness of the Safavid empire, which made coming to terms with their diminished status difficult. As the saying goes, "The victors write the history books," but the songs and the poetry are written by the losers, which was certainly the case here, except their poets and literary writers framed the defeat as a temporary setback or even as a victory. Qa'im-maqam by contrast began the war with romantic calls for jihad, but shifted his outlook to realism by the end, recognizing that Iran's weakness necessitated a diplomatic posture in order to survive. His ideas more than any others shaped Iran's foreign policy of containment in the wake of the Russo-Persian wars, ideas which continue to influence it to this day [15; 35, 44, 56].

Indeed, Iran's overarching foreign policy goal since that time has been to gain its autonomy from European powers. To do so, it embarked on its path to modernization beginning with its army [16; 197]. Its current attempts to acquire modern weapons during the Cold War to the present echo this drive to close the gap with the powerful countries that have dominated it. However, to do so Iran depended on those very powers which left it at the mercy of their own rivalries between each other. To make matters worse, Iran lay at the crossroads of multiple regions and thus got caught up in the conflict between Russia and the United Kingdom as stated at the beginning. Iran had long avoided this dynamic in the past as before the Qajar era it lay outside the European system, whereas afterward it shifted to its periphery, as it offered a tempting opening to India from Central Asia. In fact, the British entered conflict with Russia upon concluding that the latter implemented the Turkmenachy Treaty with that intention in mind [17; 9-10; 22]. That Russia lacked the capacity to take advantage of that path and would not for decades mattered not. Thus, Iran was thrust into the major conflict defining the latter part of the 19th century known as the Great Game for dominance in Central Asia and the Caucasus [2; 937-941, 946].

Iran thus fell into a category of dubious distinction that really impugned its prospects compared to states that outright lost their sovereignty to colonialism. Though the latter lost their independence, they benefitted from the modern infrastructure and state institutions the colonizers introduced to extract their resources. The European powers dominated it, with the UK and Russia forcing it to grant them most favored nation status, while still denying it those unintended public goods. Thus, Iran bore all the costs of colonialism without gaining any of its benefits. The Qajars' fragmented governing structures compounded the issue as it prevented the consolidation that would have allowed its institutions to develop cumulatively, namely the establishment of a modern military and bureaucracy [17; 22-23, 53-54].

Such was Iran's lot as a buffer state, which must be kept weak by definition. Yet, Britain's desire to maintain its empire on the cheap without expanding its army enough to match the land-based European powers determined the nature of that relationship. That premise stands at odds with its purported fears about Russian intentions over India [2; 946-947]. The British lacked the will to counter Russia, which would have enabled it to partner with Iran. A strong neighbor could have acted as a powerful deterrent against any Russian expansion to India from Central Asia. That might have created problems for the British decades in the future for maintaining their position in the Middle East, but the potential gains outweighed the risk. Instead, Britain

not only treated Iran as a buffer it went to war with Iran over Afghanistan, which benefitted Russia. Thus, Iran was left to proposition Europeans to sponsor military training missions to train one from scratch, each of which failed one after another. Ironically, only with the Russians establishment of the Cossack Brigade, were the foundations for progress set, even though they ultimately owed their allegiance to the Tsar despite being placed directly under the command of the shah. That incongruence became plain by the final days of the Qajar dynasty, as its dependence on Russia had grown so sharply [16; 199, 202].

The Qajars wanted to build a modern army not just to reclaim its sovereignty but for conquest to reclaim lost territory. If they had been able to navigate the rivalries between the Europeans, mainly the Russians and the British, and fulfilled their desire to restore the glory of the Safavid Empire, they would also have renewed their standing at home and abroad. This proved impossible because both powers perceived their interests precluded Iran from developing physical and governing infrastructure required to establish a modern state. Thus, the Qajars at last relinquished their imperial aspirations and resigned themselves to Iran's borders as they were. Its prospects only grew worse once the Russians and British reached a compromise over Iran which effectively divided the country between them as each of them were already dominant in the northern and southern regions, respectively. Counterintuitively, only when Russia set up the Cossack Brigade, which removed nearly all the pretention of Iran's sovereignty could the foundation for its military be laid. At 41 years, it lasted longer than of all the prior military missions, and only ended when Reza Pahlavi overthrew the Qajar dynasty itself in 1925 [16; 209-212, 220-223].

### *Cold War*

What settled the conflict between Russia and the UK and thus the India question was the rise of Germany, which forced them into a contentious alliance along with the US. Nevertheless, what remained unchanged was the geographic location of Iran the Middle East, such that the structure of the conflict reemerged even during WWII. Only the actors on the geopolitical stage changed, with the Soviet Union taking the role of Russia and the US beginning to take that of the UK, which was an uncomfortable and unfamiliar position in which to find itself. Iran had no such discomfort, and in fact, was desperate for US intervention on its behalf to resist domination by the Soviets and the UK to the point its press declared support for the US against Japan even prior to Pearl Harbor [18; 180, 333-334, 336]. The Iranians were basically attempting their more than century-long strategy of *movazaneh* (negative balance) with the US buffering against Russia and the UK. It failed at first with when the US forced Reza Shah to abdicate his throne in 1942, with the US appearing to divide Iran with its allies as the spoils of war. However, his son, Mohammed Reza Shah convinced the US to back his faction, and pushed the Soviets out. Negative balance had proven itself once again [18; 180, 339, 341-343, 346-351].

This was the beginning of the mutually beneficial US-Iran relationship. The US gained a strategically located ally to establish a bastion in the Middle East against the Soviets while Iran received Western weapons and even nuclear technology, which its elites saw as the means to rise to the ranks of the most advanced states. However, the Iranian people became unconvinced that this relationship was not simply another in a long line that subordinated Iran to a Western power, a strongly hold view that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Soviets even believed that the Islamic Republic that succeeded it would switch their allegiance to them [19; 6]. While this was not completely implausible, the new regime having been brought to power on a platform of resisting foreign domination chose to join the Non-aligned Movement [20].

Moreover, Iran has had bitter experience with Russia going back to the Russo-Persian wars, in which it lost significant territory, meddled in its succession process, aligned itself with secessionist movements after both World Wars, occupied it during the second one, backed the communist Tudeh party, invaded Afghanistan which borders it, and aided Iraq when it invaded and throughout the entire war in the 1980s. At least at first glance, one could be forgiven for concluding that the Islamic Republic might actually favor the West somewhat over the Soviets. To this day, the press publishes these grievances to remind people they have reason to distrust Russia. Since Iranians decided it could not trust either, that left only non-alignment, which Ayatollah Khomeini pithily summed up as, "Neither East nor West" [20].

## Discussion

### *Russian and Iranian Interests*

Despite these grievances, those with the West have been more recent and culturally more intrusive, producing greater friction than with Russia. Tehran has felt that Moscow has been the partner its forebearers sought nearly two centuries ago, on the contrary. In turn, Russia, in dire straits in the wake of the Soviet collapse was desperate for markets to gain the cash flow necessary to rejuvenate itself. This coincidence of wants while fine for bartering in a transactional relationship does not make a strategic partnership make, though it has withstood internal disagreements as well as pressure from the US and even the international community. Instead, their relationship generally follows the waxing and waning of Russia's relations with the US [21; 113]. Nonetheless, Iran forms the key part in fulfilling its ambitions to lead a Eurasian coalition against the Western-designed international order [13; 27-39].

Arms transfers are the most tangible expression of that geopolitical strategy, which, when taken together, can understandably be mistaken for a strategic alliance. Arms transfers are the material expression of that strategy. That looks like a strategic partnership, but the problem with that relationship for Iran is that its current posture keeps it dependent not just on Russia but its interests which are at odds with that of the West and its own. That the arms transfers grant Iran the sense of autonomy and freedom from foreign domination it has sought since the conclusion of the Russo-Persian wars does not change the reality that that relationship simply transfers its autonomy to the weaker European power. That both genuinely share a grievance against being humiliated and denied their rightful place in the world by the West intensifies the mirage. How long it chooses, or will be able, to live in that distorted frame depends on the outcome of the Ukraine War and whether the regime survives the US and Israeli attacks.

## Conclusions

The Russian-Iran relationship hinges on the survival of the Islamic Republic. For no matter the outcome of the Ukraine War, the prospect of reconciliation between the Islamic Republic and the West has gone up in the flames of the US and Israeli decapitation strike. Whatever government may come after its demise would likely prefer to keep Russia at a distance, given it has been the Islamic Republic's most important supporter. In contrast, a succeeding government would restore relations with the West, as most of the population is hostile to the current regime, especially after it killed upwards of 30,000 people in its brutal crackdown of the latest round of protests. Up until the strikes, its apparent control gave credence to its staying power as it has been able to put down the protest movements against it. Yet, even without the crackdowns and external intervention, the regime's support base was becoming ever more precarious as the older generations who had living memories of the Revolution continued to pass away and the rural population migrated to the cities.<sup>3</sup> Even if the regime survives the destruction its most of its military assets, it will be greatly weakened and without much help coming from Russia given its own financial problems due to its war in Ukraine. Alternatively, if it falls a return to the West might actually enable Iran to achieve the strategic autonomy it has long sought as it would no longer be dependent on powers whose interests are contrary to its own.

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<sup>3</sup>Based on Sadri's conversations via What'sUp App encrypted call service on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2023 with local Iranian scholars from the fields of Geography, Political Science, and Sociology, who insisted to remain anonymous.

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## Қажарлардан Ислам Республикасына дейін: Иранның автономия үшін күресі

Мақалада Иран-Ресей қатынастарының ұзақ мерзімді динамикасы қазіргі өзара іс-қимылды Қажарлар дәуірінен Ислам Республикасы кезеңіне дейінгі кең тарихи контексте талдау арқылы қарастырылған. Қолданыстағы әдебиеттің басым бөлігі екіжақты қатынастарды негізінен Пехлеви кезеңі немесе 1979 жылдан кейінгі кезең аясына талдау жасайды. Зерттеуде Тегеран мен Мәскеу арасындағы ынтымақтастық пен шиеленіс моделі Иранның ұлы державалық бәсекелестік жағдайында автономияны сақтау үшін жүргізген тарихи күресіне негізделген қайталанатын геосаяси стратегияны көрсетеді деп тұжырымдалған. Тарихи талдауға сүйене отырып, мақала Иранның үстем сыртқы күштердің ықпалын тежеу үшін олардың арасындағы бәсекелестікті пайдалануға негізделген «теріс тепе-теңдік» стратегиясын тұрақты түрде ұстанғанын көрсетеді. XIX ғасырдағы орыс-парсы соғыстарынан бастап, Иранның аумақтық шығындары мен стратегиялық осалдығы оның билеушілерін құрылымдық әлсіздік жағдайында егемендікті сақтауға бағытталған прагматикалық дипломатиялық стратегияларды қабылдауға мәжбүр етті. Қажарлар кезеңінде Иран Ресей ықпалын Ұлыбританиямен байланыстарды дамыту арқылы теңгеруге ұмтылды, ал кейінгі режимдер Кеңес ықпалын АҚШ-пен жақындасу арқылы өтеуге тырысты. 1979 жылғы төңкерістен кейін Ислам Республикасы бұл ұстанымды «Шығыс та емес, Батыс та емес» доктринасы арқылы білдіріп, бір ғана серіктеске тәуелді болудан гөрі бәсекелес державалармен сақтықпен өзара әрекеттесу моделін нығайтты. Соңғы өзгерістер — қару-жарақ жеткізілімдері, геосаяси үйлестіру және Батыс ықпалына ортақ қарсы тұру — кейбір зерттеушілерге Иран мен Ресейді стратегиялық серіктестер ретінде сипаттауға негіз бергенімен, бұл мақала олардың қарым-қатынасы негізінен мәмілелік сипатта қалып отырғанын дәлелдейді. Тарихи қайшылықтар, стратегиялық мүдделердің айырмашылығы, экономикалық интеграцияның шектеулілігі және өзара сенімсіздік тұрақты одақтың қалыптасуын тежейді. Қазіргі байланыстарды тарихи даму траекториясы аясында қарастыра отырып, бұл зерттеу Иранның Ресеймен өзара әрекеттесуін стратегиялық серіктестік ретінде емес, бәсекеге қабілетті халықаралық жүйеде стратегиялық автономияны сақтауға бағытталған кең стратегияның бөлігі ретінде жақсы түсінетіндігін көрсетеді.

*Кілт сөздер:* тарихи талдау, Ресей, Иран, қатынастар, ынтымақтастық, қақтығыс, тарихи траектория, Батыс державалары, тарихи реніштер, ұлттық мүдделер.

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## От Каджаров до Исламской Республики: борьба Ирана за автономию

В данной статье рассматривается долгосрочная динамика ирано-российских отношений путем изучения современного взаимодействия в широких исторических рамках — от эпохи Каджаров до Исламской Республики. Большая часть существующей литературы анализирует двусторонние отношения преимущественно в контексте периода Пехлеви или режима после 1979 года. В отличие от них, в данном исследовании утверждается, что модель сотрудничества и напряженности между Тегераном и Москвой отражает повторяющуюся геополитическую стратегию, уходящую корнями в историческую борьбу Ирана за сохранение автономии в условиях соперничества великих держав. Опираясь на исторический анализ, статья демонстрирует, что Иран последовательно придерживался стратегии «негативного баланса», стремясь противостоять влиянию доминирующих внешних сил путем использования соперничества между ними. Начиная с русско-персидских войн девятнадцатого века, территориальные потери и стратегическая уязвимость Ирана вынуждали его правителей принимать прагматичные дипломатические стратегии, направленные на сохранение суверенитета вопреки структурной слабости. В период Каджаров Иран пытался сбалансировать российское влияние путем развития связей с Великобританией, в то время как более поздние режимы стремились компенсировать советскую мощь за счет более тесных отношений с США. После революции 1979 года Исламская Республика сформулировала этот подход через доктрину «Ни Восток, ни Запад», закрепив модель осторожного взаимодействия с конкурирующими державами вместо присоединения к какому-либо одному покровителю. Хотя последние события — включая поставки оружия, геополитическую координацию и общее противодействие западному влиянию — побудили некоторых наблюдателей охарактеризовать Иран и Россию как стратегических партнеров, в данной статье утверждается, что их отношения остаются во многом транзакционными. Исторические обиды, расходящиеся стратегические интересы, ограниченная экономическая интеграция и взаимные подозрения сдерживают возникновение прочного союза. Рассматривая современные связи через призму исторической траектории, данное исследование показывает, что взаимодействие Ирана с Россией лучше понимать не как стратегическое партнерство, а как часть более широкой стратегии, направленной на сохранение стратегической автономии в конкурентной международной системе.

*Ключевые слова:* исторический анализ, Россия, Иран, отношения, сотрудничество, конфликт, историческая траектория, западные державы, исторические обиды, национальные интересы.

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