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MA Thesis in Modern Middle Eastern Studies
The Iran — Russia Nexus
Development of Bilateral Relations (2012 – 2015)

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Introduction

The idea for this thesis came about in the summer of 2015, merely a year after completing an internship at the Polish Permanent Mission to the United Nations Offices in Vienna. Spending substantial amount of time covering activities related to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), allowed to observe the two international players, namely Islamic Republic of Iran and Russian Federation in day-to-day activities related to the then negotiated - JCPOA (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), known as the Iran Deal. First ever professional exposure of working within an international organization inspired and encouraged to broaden stronger interest in International Relations, taking these two countries into consideration. Previous lack of experience in this field, coming from language, culture and literature studies at first possessed a challenge, further replaced by increasing curiosity and wanting to venture out to, in order to seek for answers. Finding out was important; why, how and what for Russia and Iran are indeed increasingly becoming more apparent partners in the international arena nowadays, and have become more outspoken about it than ever before? As for the past twenty years the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and Iran has been rather unstable and to a degree, unpredictable, especially for other main players in the international arena. For instance, when looking at this issue from the Russian perspective, it is apparent that it would be difficult to single out a country other than Iran whose relations with Moscow have experienced so many twists and turns in such relatively short time span. This relationship has been often marked by both governments' communication pauses and backlogs, as well as accusations of failing to meet earlier commitments, not to mention brokering or keeping promises. This thesis will examine the character and dynamics and seek sober, analytical outlook of this engrossing relationship.

As John J. Hamre points out much of Iran and Russia's "geopolitical dynamic was submerged during the Cold War, which imposed an ideological veneer over regional and geopolitical power politics. Since that time, the succession of Iranian governments has defined a rejectionist agenda against the West, but its radicalism alienated Russia. In recent years a more historic pattern has emerged. Each country has returned to its imperial core to chart a way ahead. Each sees threats and opportunities in 'using' each other. Each has seen a way to use the regional geopolitics to advance national interests in a global agenda. The historic pattern – conflict,

manipulation, cooperation – has re-emerged.”¹ Identifying these steps and putting into an order the revival of this mutually beneficial relationship will be encapsulated in this work.

How relevant is the Iran-Russia nexus?

For the purpose of writing, what needed closer consideration was the concrete timeline, relevant enough to the research process, which protrudes to two states’ foreign policy prerogatives at a particular time. The time span chosen for this analysis came about as a result of the importance of three factors. Firstly, 2012 is the year marking the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s second term as president of the Russian Federation. Secondly, simultaneously it is the penultimate year of second-term presidency for Iran’s very own Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Thirdly, the timeframe reaches 14 July 2015. The date marking signing of the Iran Deal is seen as huge success of the international diplomatic efforts, it is also a proof and to some extent, result of the especially cordial relationship between Russia and Iran between 2012-2015. The deal’s main goal was to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, by simultaneously allowing the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes – all this safeguarded and monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Needless to say, the lengthy negotiations leading to signing the deal, have only reiterated the existence of the nexus of power between Iran and Russia and provided a perfect field for its visibility to other main international and regional players. In further chapters, the genesis, formation, tenacity as well as constraints and implications in the international context of this mutually beneficial relationship between Iran and Russia will be analyzed. It will be portrayed how close the Iran and Russia’s governments have cooperated, and how the ties that have been developing at higher-than-normal pace for the three years prior to the Vienna Agreement. Hassan Rouhani’s coming to power in August 2013, it has made it more apparent that Iranian foreign policy vectors would change and that Rouhani’s administration’s ambition is to gradually, yet cautiously make an attempt to break away with its predecessor’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy discourse. The timeframe in the thesis’ title (2012-2015) reflects just that – years most crucial for shaping the still ongoing rapprochement between Russia and Iran. It also helps to look at this relationship in a broader regional context which can be observed up to this day. Its implications are currently of

¹Brannan, Samuel. *The Turkey, Russia, Iran Nexus. Evolving Power Dynamics in the Middle East. Caucasus and Central Asia (CSIS) Reports*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013, p. IV

utmost importance and are indeed influencing modern Middle East in a more profound way than in the past, and are overarching in other areas of the world, i.e. Central Asia.

Having extensively studied the two countries before, be it through lenses of language, literature, modern culture, social studies, gender studies and extensive visits to both Iran and Russia, lead to logical conclusion; to delve deeper and look more closely at the highly politicized dimension of their relations. In terms of this thesis' methodology this will be done by providing historical and qualitative analysis of sources documenting the rapprochement between the two. Furthermore, it is a single-case study, aiming to draw on existing understandings of sources and leading to creating a) comprehensive analytical account based on historical backdrop of Iran and Russia relations, then on moving to main body of analysis of 2012-2015 modern-times strategic nexus b) water-testing base for future studies/predictions by Iranian/Russian politicians' statements discourse analysis, used for alternative readings of both states' specific relationship. Pertinent ambition of this project was not to solely draw from sources produced by the West and in the West, but aim at incorporating material written in Russia, often in Russian, thus showcasing its very own perspective, and alternative food for thought on the rapprochement with Iran. Perhaps offering often contrasting, or mutually complementing views could be of added value to better understanding nature of nexuses of power in general, and in the contemporary Middle East? Up to the very time of writing this thesis in 2016, it can be recognised that the special relationship of Iran and Russia is still in place and bears fruit in the international arena. Particular togetherness of Moscow and Tehran in the regional perspective i.e. Syria, have only further purpotrated a need for putting some events and processes of their relations into more orderly, systematic account which this work strives to provide.

Research question

Crucial to this thesis is a research question overlapping throughout all its chapters, and by providing material for reflection throughout the upcoming analysis: 1) What kind of nexus describes best the Iran-Russia rapprochement in particular timing of 2012-2015? The form suggested in the thesis is of a sustainable, strategic détente, not seen earlier in both states' bilateral relations history. Hereby, the reasoning behind this question is to, towards the end of this work, question Moscow and Tehran rapprochement in terms of predictions for the future, and/or alternative readings? These two will reverberate in the analysis and are intristically

aligned with looking at the volatile nature of the bilateral relations of Russia and Iran amidst discussing the lack of one, consistent strategy of Moscow towards its southern neighbour. Instead, it may as well appear that the relationship between the two countries is mainly driven by set of step-by-step, single-case by case dynamics, both of which prompt the change in attitude towards one another. Outlined research question feeds into current debate on increasingly elevated status of Russia and Iran as emerging powers in multipolar world. This work also aims to offer perspective on whether the current relationship between the two countries is indeed a promising alliance or merely a resultant of interests that at some point collide with each others' strategic interests? Moreover, there might be a dichotomy between the level of priority of such events for the interested parties. According to Cambridge dictionary nexus is: "an important connection between the parts of a system or a group of things".² This rather broad definition can be interpreted with potential for continuous fluctuation between one thing and its opposite. Hereby, this ambivalence calls for being further explored in upcoming collected sources analysis.

Synopsis of the Chapters

Chapter I is dealing with historical context and setting the stage for the Iran-Russia rapprochement. A synthetic overview will be outlined to feed into better understanding of the nature of ties between these ambitious international players. Chapter II provides more detailed outlook on the dynamics of the Iran-Russia nexus in the timeline 2012-2015 and will characterize its most distinctive features. This will include the dynamics of political, as well as economic bilateral cooperation and geostrategic dimension. It also serves as a timeline of the alliance intensification, and deals with some problems and prospects of the relations between the two. Moreover, examples (case studies) will be provided on Iran and Russia's joint efforts, and challenges, in solution of the Caspian Sea basin issues and the importance of Central Asia for both Moscow and Tehran. It will also put some closer attention through the review of sources which point to feasibility of the nexus in terms of economic cooperation revival, taking consideration that these two states are remaining fierce competitors on world's oil and gas markets. It also appeared crucial enough to briefly touch upon dimension of Moscow and Tehran's military cooperation, as it often in the past determined vectors of strengthening its bilateral relations, and at the same time, it can be also seen as one of better examples of nexus'

²Cambridge Dictionary, University of Cambridge, London-Cambridge, 2016, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nexus>

fragile character. Chapter III concludes the review of the material and looks at potential prospects and opportunities for the future, especially in a wider regional context. It strives to feed into a research question and offer some recommendations on how the Iran-Russia nexus should be looked at, especially in the light of currently very intense and complex geopolitics in the Middle East.

Chapter I

- Setting the Stage: historical backdrop of the Iran-Russia bilateral relations

In this chapter some historical details on the developing Iran-Russia relationship will be outlined. It is important to look at history, as it may show that the modern times' nexus may come out as an accidental of mutual past involvement of these two increasingly important international and regional players. Moreover, examples of mutual cooperation in field of economy/trade, as well as regional examples of Central Asia and Caspian Sea basin will be provided, to prove how the beneficial relationship of Moscow and Tehran feeds into their current mutually complementing foreign policy strategies, or what can be the potential challenges of rivalry in the current, dynamic set of circumstances dictating responses to one another's actions, accordingly.

- *Iran, Russia and the Great Game*

“The Persian government is also obliged to defend its own rights and to use all proper means to establish friendships with foreign governments. The English and Russian governments have their rights as Persia's neighbours, but their jealousy and envy for one another put the Persian government in the most difficult position and in order to protect its rights, it has been forced to behave in a way that cannot be endured.”³

The abovementioned passage from *Yek Kalame*, a XIX century Persian treatise demonstrates long-standing interest of foreign powers in Iran's affairs, moreover it points out the rivalry of Russia and the British Empire over Iran, known as *The Great Game*. Indeed, as Elena Andreeva argues: “The relationship between the two neighboring countries of Iran and Russia extends over more than a millennium. Prior to the eighteenth century, Iran and Russia treated each other

³Seyed Gohrab A.A., McGlinn S., *Yak Kaleme: 19th Century Persian Treatise Introducing Western Codified Law*, Leiden University Press, Leiden, 2010, pp. xxiv-xxv

as equal in their sporadic trade and diplomatic contacts. During the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725), Russia started to pursue expansionist designs against Iran. According to the reports of some Arab geographers, contacts between Iran and Russia, at least in the area of trade, already existed in the ninth century.”⁴ After delving a little deeper into the history of relations between the two countries, despite their past and current regimes, or governments and territorial fluctuations, some characterizing elements are provided by Mehdi Sanaie, who claims that Russia and Iran first established diplomatic relations already back in the 15th century and that “the two countries have gone through different periods since then, with better relations giving way to worse ones, and contentions and animosity replacing cooperation.”⁵ Before we look at Iran and Russia relations in nearer history, it is important to reiterate the volatile nature of this relationship deeply rooted in history of first Russia’s expeditions and conflicts with Persian Empire. Extensive travelogues were created on the subject, and they can tell us a bit more about the perception of Iran by Russia. To contextualize the nature of the Iran-Russia exchange up to this day, it is important to return to this invaluable source. Clement Therme argues, that “nineteenth-century travelers stories reveal Russian perceptions of Iran are biased and negative.”⁶ This narrative is reflected throughout most of writings whereby “one persistent theme of the travelogue authors is that all of the glory of Iran lay in the remote past. At present, as most of them claimed straight-forwardly or implied, Iran was weak and backward due to its religious fanaticism, corrupt and ineffective administration, outdated military and low levels of healthcare, education and culture. These inadequacies made Iran an easy prey for the anticipated Russian advance. Since Iranians could not rule over their country effectively, progress and development were only possible through the assistance of an advanced and benevolent empire such as Russia. This argument made the ‘civilizing mission’ in Iran appear perfectly legitimate and even noble and served as a justification for imperial and colonial domination.”⁷ It is important to further reiterate Russian perspective on Iran because it did play a special role there ever since Peter the Great. It is the early eighteenth century “when Russia started pursuing aggressive policies against Iran, pushing southwards toward the Persian Gulf in quest for warm-water ports. The areas that Russia had annexed or tried to annex from Iran were The Caucasus, the Caspian provinces of Iran and its northern and northeastern regions. If we take into account the current war in Chechnya, the Russian expansion into the former Iranian territory of the

⁴Elena Andreeva, *Russia and Iran in the Great Game. Travelogues and Orientalism*, London, Routledge, 2007, p.13

⁵Mehdi Sanaie, *Russia in Global Affairs* No.2 July-September, 2007

⁶Clement Therme, *Iranian-Russian Encounters, Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 393

⁷Elena Andreeva, *Russia and Iran in the Great Game. Travelogues and Orientalism*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 5

Caucasus is by now more than 200 years old.”⁸

Looking at this issue from the Iranian perspective “the legacy of this history has been largely negative. Russia’s southern expansion was achieved at Iran’s expense, as best exemplified by the Russo-Iranian wars of 1804-1813 and 1824-1828. Later in history things have changed with the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and it can be said that it had a positive effect on Iran, since it ended the British-Russo entente. However, the Bolshevik regime soon reverted to the czarist pattern of behaviour toward Iran and tried to dominate it, this time by spreading Communism and revolutionary ideas.”⁹

This effectively brings us to discussing The Great Game – the struggle between Russia and Britain for dominance in the East. According to Andreeva “as a significant episode in the history of colonialism, the Great Game started in the early nineteenth century and intensified in the second half when Russia’s expansion into the Caucasus began to alarm Great Britain. The culminating event of the Great Game in Iran took place in 1907 when the Anglo-Russian Convention divided Iran into spheres of influence. According to this agreement, northern and central Iran were defined as the British sphere, with the area between these two zones deemed neutral territory. An analysis of the Russian travelogues proves that a *de facto* division and the Russian sphere of influence had existed throughout the nineteenth century and was only confirmed by the Convention of 1907.”¹⁰

Furthermore, from such accounts we move towards times of World War I, when it becomes clearer that “Iran became a war theatre for German, Ottoman, Russian and British troops in spite of the fact that it had declared neutrality when the war started. Russia occupied northern Iran and tried to promote further colonization there. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 ended Russian colonial designs on Iran – Russia withdrew, and the ‘Great Game’ came to an end.”¹¹ There is utter bitterness of Russia’s retreat and failure of Bolshevik ideals spreading to the entire Iranian population. The levels of mistrust and cautiousness have developed on both sides and different perceptions have then emerged. It is apparent that since the time of the Great Game, roughly two centuries ago, one of Iran’s governing elites’ main preoccupation has been to watchfully observe the relations with the Russian Empire, then

⁸Ibidem

⁹Shireen Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era - Resisting the New International Order*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2010, p. 103

¹⁰Andreeva, p. 6

¹¹Andreeva, p. 21

Soviet Union, now Russian Federation. According to Shireen T. Hunter “during this period, basic patterns of political and economic interaction have developed between the two countries – patterns whose essential features have survived changes in their respective ideologies and regimes while responding and adapting to new circumstances. Thus an analysis of present relations requires prior understanding of traditional patterns of Russo-Iranian relations and deep-rooted perceptions. The basic pattern of Russo-Iranian relations was laid down when then once-powerful Safavid Empire crumbled, heralding a long period of Iranian decline, while the Russian Empire was entering a new phase of expansion under Peter the Great. Taking advantage of Iran’s chaos in the wake of the Afghan invasion, Russia occupied Iran’s northern provinces, thus establishing a long-term pattern of incursion and expansion.”¹² Level of mistrust and road to watchful partnership might be to some extent paved by the psycho-historic implications of a treaty which Iran and Russia have signed in 1921. According to Muriel Atkin, “the belief is widespread that the 1921 treaty, particularly its sixth article, permits the Soviets to send troops into Iran whenever they consider their security threatened from that direction. Typical of this view is the assertion that relations between the two countries have been bedeviled by the ghost of the treaty, which allowed the Soviet Union to intervene in Iran in the event of a threat against Soviet territory. The note specified that the relevant treaty provisions were ‘intended to apply only to cases in which preparations have been made for a considerable armed attack upon Russia.’”¹³ Even though this treaty was eventually cancelled and others followed, i.e. in one from 1935, still “the mythic version of this (1921) history gives great weight to the role of quasi-instinctual obsessions. By their very nature, such irrational drives are not readily modified by the ordinary tools of conventional diplomacy.”¹⁴ Having accentuated this, it was namely 5th and 6th points of the treaty (giving Russia a right for a military intervention to protect its strategic national interests), which have been immediately revoked at the United Nations, by the newly-established Islamic Republic during very first days of the Revolution in 1979.

¹²Shireen T. Hunter, *Soviet-American Relations with Pakistan*, MacMillian Press, Basingstoke, 1987, p. 244

¹³Muriel Atkin, *Neither East nor West. Iran, The Soviet Union and the United States*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 107-108

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 111

- *From Shah Pahlavi's Iran to the Islamic Republic: challenging continuity in Russia-Iran cooperation*

The period between two World Wars and “the further development of the Soviet-Iranian relations was influenced by changes in the power structure in the two states as they both increasingly gravitated towards dictatorship, as well as by the world economic crisis.”¹⁵ World War II brought a couple of unfortunate events for Iran’s dynamics of developing ties with Russia. First and foremost, “Iran has fallen victim to yet another entente, this time the 1940’s pact of Russia with Nazi Germany (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) which threw into Soviet Russia’s arms all the territory on its immediate southern, Asiatic borders. In spite of the fact that in the 1940’s Russia 1) took advantage of allied invasion to Iran to snatch Iranian provinces of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan and establish pro-Soviet socialist republics there and 2) provided continued support to communist-leaning groups under Pahlavi’s Iran. Secondly, going towards the 1960’s and 1970’s, the USSR pursued policy which stood on par with its prerogative in most of the Middle East as well as Africa, where it was gaining foothold – to simultaneously keep bilateral relations in order, but to offer support to left-leaning opposition groups.”¹⁶

Further on, Post-World War II period up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 can be also be described as years of economic diplomacy. Soviet Union was seen as one of Iran’s main natural gas buyers, especially crucial for its Caucasus republics during winter months. For example, in 1972 “a new treaty on developing economic and technical cooperation was signed, which envisaged participation of the USSR in the development of Iranian ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy, oil-and-gas and petrochemical industries, irrigation, agriculture, power energy facilities, and grain elevators. Considerable attention was paid to cooperation in the field of personnel training. The treaty was concluded for a period of 15 years with automatic annual renewals for the subsequent five years so long as neither side formally requested its suspension.”¹⁷

First signs of Iran’s downgrade of relations with USSR became imminent during early days of 1979’s Islamic Revolution, because “since the balance of power between Tehran and Moscow

¹⁵Mamedova, N.M., *Russia ii. Iranian-Soviet Relations (1917-1991)*, Encyclopædia Iranica, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/russia-ii-iranian-soviet-relations-1917-1991>

¹⁶Shireen Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era - Resisting the New International Order*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2010, p. 104

¹⁷Mamedova, N.M., *Russia ii. Iranian-Soviet Relations (1917-1991)*, Encyclopædia Iranica, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/russia-ii-iranian-soviet-relations-1917-1991>

has been asymmetrical, Moscow has enjoyed a stronger position in its relationship with Iran even after the fall of Soviet Union. One thing which contributed to Iranian perception of Russia and the downgrade at that time lied in lack of trust in the days following the 1979 Islamic Revolution.”¹⁸ Vivid memories of Russia’s historically engrained meddling in Iranian internal politics were well alive, especially taking into consideration previous, early XX century Russia-instigated separatist movements in the northern provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran. Furthermore, almost “immediately after the Revolution, Iran announced a price rise for the gas supplied to the USSR. The Iranian-Soviet relations also suffered an important setback when the Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, in December 1979. Like the United States, the Soviet Union was also branded and denounced as a ‘Satan.’”¹⁹ Reported were the attacks on USSR Tehran embassy and Isfahan consulate. Bilateral relations “were also adversely affected by the supply of Soviet weapons to Iraq at the peak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1982, and by the suppression of the Tudeh party and subsequent show trials of some of its prominent members on television.”²⁰

On one hand, Moscow feared potential for renewed and nationalist twist on the pan-Islamist discourse in Tehran, especially in relation to its Caucasus Soviet republics. On the other hand, amongst mistrust and weariness, vigilant respect between the neighbours has in the end prevailed, and flared up hostilities were, more or less bound to be quickly extinguished. Up to this day, within the Iranian political circles lies a pre-conceived idea encapsulated in one Farsi word for *zerang* – *clever*, just as it is, being attributed to Moscow’s skillfulness in international politics. Moreover, well before the collapse of the USSR “the Soviets have cultivated important friends among the top leadership of Iran, including president Ali Khamenei [current Great Leader of the Islamic Republic], Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, or State Prosecutor-General Mousavi Khomeiniha.”²¹

- *Soviet Union and its Demise – New Opportunities for Russia and Iran*

¹⁸Clement Therme, *Iranian-Russian Encounters, Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 394

¹⁹Ibidem. To be more precise, it was being branded as the ‘Little Satan’ alongside the ‘Great Satan’ – U.S.A.

²⁰Mamedova, N.M. “RUSSIA ii. IRANIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS (1917-1991),” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition

²¹Martin Sicker, *The Bear and the Lion, Soviet Imperialism and Iran*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1998, p. 141

*“Iranian relations with USSR were little better and Iran actually rejected a Soviet offer of protection, warning it against using Iran as a Cold War battleground and condemning the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.”*²²

The Iran-Russia relations in the peak times of the Soviet Union can be characterized as cautious, yet neighbourly, and notwithstanding significant United States’ involvement in Shah Pahavi’s Iran politics, they were considered appropriate. Indeed, watchfulness has remained, as “after the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, classical strategic and economic great power rivalry was transformed into an existential battle between two diverging socioeconomic and political systems for determining the future of the world and humanity. Within this new systemic configuration, Iran as a state with a 1,500 miles common border with the Soviet Union acquired even greater geopolitical significance.”²³

Later, merely a year after the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War has started. The end of the hostilities between the two states has ended in 1988, and “coincided with crippling major changes in the international order, namely the demise of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. These changes had benefits for Iran’s nascent reopening to the international community, as Moscow and Tehran perceived common interest surrounding expanded cooperation. For newly independent Russia, Tehran offered strategic inroads to the broader Middle East, and a prospective market for Russian armaments and technology – a better bet than Moscow’s discredited former regional proxy, Saddam Hussein. Later in the 1990’s the continuing decline of the relations with the U.S. and new internal economic pressures persuaded some within the Iranian system that Tehran would need to find alternative markets and investors.”²⁴ Further on, in spite of Russia’s meddling in Iran-Iraq war (i.e. arms sales controversy), as well as Moscow’s aid to the Afghan opposition in the period, high-level visits have shown that it is in both states’ interest to keep the relationship as active as possible. For example, “following FM Ali Akbar Velayati’s Moscow visit there there were reports about reopening of the Soviet-Iranian gas pipeline and the return of Soviet technical experts to the Isfahan steel plant and to some other projects, and the Soviet-Iranian chamber of commerce reopened in Moscow. In August 1987 the Soviet first deputy foreign minister Yuri Vorontsov signed several agreements in Teheran on ‘large-scale’ projects of mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

²²Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East. Second Edition.*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2015, p. 214

²³Shireen Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era - Resisting the New International Order*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2010, p. xi

²⁴Suzanne Maloney, *Iran’s Political Economy Since the Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015, p. 185

A new stage in normalization of Soviet-Iranian relations came when the chairman of the Islamic Council and acting supreme commander-in-chief of the Iranian armed forces, [Akbar] Hashemi-Rafsanjani, visited Moscow in 1989. The Soviet leaders correctly predicted his future position as the supreme ruler of his country, and received him with maximum pomp and ceremony. He and Gorbachev signed a declaration in the Kremlin on the principles of relations and friendly cooperation between the USSR and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which may perhaps be considered as a triumph of the realpolitik and pragmatism that were gaining the upper hand in both countries.”²⁵ Nevertheless, what needs to be said to feed into historical context, is that none of the pre-Revolution initiatives between Moscow and Tehran, be it in the sphere of the economy, military, border management, have drastically affected Iran’s relationship with the United States, whereby “the ‘good neighbour’ policy remained the kingpin of Soviet policy towards Iran, and was paid for in various ways by Shah. There were almost no large Iranian army units near the 2,500-kilometer Soviet-Iranian frontier, and there were no American military bases in Iran other than electronic tracking stations. Visits and messages were exchanged at the topmost levels, a treaty of friendship was signed in 1972, and there was a compromise demarcation of frontiers between the two countries. In the 1960’s and 1970’s several mutually advantageous trade and economic agreements were signed, including the construction of a gas pipeline towards the Soviet border, the steel plant in Isfahan, and the Arak’s engineering plant in exchange for supplies of natural gas and traditional export goods. The USSR even sold Iran some military hardware on a commercial basis.”²⁶

Events leading up to the collapse to the Soviet Union gradually brought up a shift within Russia’s foreign policy. The world was changing at a fast pace and Moscow’s aspirations were to be re-considered and re-adjusted. The ‘old-new’ way of thinking has re-appeared and Iran has once more become one of the vectors, gradually gaining on Moscow’s strategists’ agenda. Gorbachev’s perestroika reverberated all the way down to Iran, and its relations with USSR “warmed noticeably in the final years of the Soviet Union. However, the icy relations only melted after the Soviet Union’s collapse and after Moscow reduced its global claims. There was more mutual understanding between the two countries and cooperation unfolded in politics, in culture and in the economy. This was the most dramatic change to take place in Iranian-Russian relations over the span of several centuries. The two countries stopped viewing

²⁵Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East. From Messianism to Pragmatism*, Ithaca Press, Reading, 1993, pp. 324-325

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 118

each other as a threat and recognized some common dangers facing both of them.”²⁷ This dramatic shift continued well into the in the mid 1990’s when “from a predominantly Western-oriented foreign policy, it embarked on a more diversified strategy. In the early 1990’s, Russia’s approach had been characterised by the rejection of the Soviet past. Such a high premium was placed on cooperation with the West that Russia relinquished many of its historic partnerships. However, by mid-1993, the resolute turn to the West had been tempered by the move to a more reserved policy. One of the most noticeable aspects of this policy shift related to the diversification of Russia’s alignments. Russia began to develop and expand cooperation with a number of key states, which had previously been marginalised in Russian foreign policy, as they were seen to be less than fully integrated members of the international community. Consequently, far more emphasis was placed on a policy of active alignment policies, as they constitute a defining feature of the Russian foreign policy shift.”²⁸ Belopolsky talks about so-called challenger states, and points to Iran, as an example of Russia’s new alignment policy representing this shift. At this time in the 1990’s diversification has become necessity for Moscow and actively involving Iran was central to its strategic reorientation. Detailed ways, in which this very shift was prompted by the United States and how dependent its vectors are to current Washington’s stance in the Middle East hold enough substance for another analysis. Nevertheless, it needs to be reiterated that „from a policy largely premised on responsiveness to Iranian initiatives, Russia came to use its alignment with Iran to actively challenge the United States. Peculiar to the Russian-Iranian relationship in the post-Cold War period has been the fact that these relations occurred almost entirely in the shadow of American interference. Russia frequently examined its policy towards Iran through the lens of American suspicions of Iran. The Iranian case was the clearest illustration of how the American factor played into Russian alignment policy.”²⁹ Iran’s role as a ‚bargaining chip‘ has tossed throughout history, therefore playing a role in the Russian-American relationship. Dynamics of crises between these two sure bring up challenges, as well as opportunities for Tehran. As much as crises between Moscow and Washington gain and lose momentum, so will a Russian change in calculations towards Iran. During the first decade’s aftermath of the revolution, there has been a mix of rapprochement, mistrust with occasional flaring up. However, by the end of the 1980’s relations became more stable with both sides’ determined to expand and further improve bilateral ties.

²⁷Mehdi Sanaie, *Problems and Prospects in Russian-Iranian Relations*, Russia in Global Affairs, 2007

²⁸Helen Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers: Russian Alignment with China, Iran and Iraq in the Unipolar Era*, Palgrave Macmillian, Basingstoke, 2009, p. 1

²⁹Ibid. p. 97

Confirmation of the new Moscow's outlook, encompassing the West, and the East, of which Iran inclusion becomes an indisputable feature with Vladimir Putin's coming to power in the year 2000. Newly adopted concept of Russia's foreign policy supported multipolarity in the world and continued to defy U.S. hegemony. Vladimir Putin has repeated this during a security conference in Munich, in 2007. Hearing various statements of contemporary Iranian politicians from various background, it comes to mind that Iran happens to promote a similar vision in its foreign policy approaches.

- *Case study examples: areas for cooperation between Russia and Iran*

a) *Trade and economy*

Complicated and fragile international situation, especially for Russia finding itself under the sanctions of many of its important trade partners, including the EU, further prompts it to actively venture out and seek new trade partners. Hereby comes Iran, once more following the logic that the well-forgotten old can be new again when the time is ripe. In Tehran, since Iran Deal prompted lifting most of economic sanctions by the UN Security Council, followed by the EU, it is seen as something consequent, that it will work more on establishing closer, more effective partnerships in the sphere of trade/economy with Russia. As always when the rapprochement occurs, two countries are bound to seal various industrial and trade deals, adding to other projects aimed at trade expansion between the two countries. The stakes are high on both sides, knowing how at least in Russia, big businesses connections to the Kremlin continue to significantly determine Russia's foreign policy Iranian vector. Nuclear reactors, gas turbine engines, power plants, animal feed, grains and tens of other products are ready to be offered to Iran by Russia. On the other hand "Iran sees in Russia a means of avoiding isolation from the international community in not only the political-diplomatic but also economic and military fields."³⁰ Even though during the times of international sanctions imposed on Iran, Tehran had prioritized economic interest in its relations with Moscow ahead of most other objectives of its foreign policy, times have changed and other, broader priorities were set to be incorporated, for instance in broader regional perspective. However, many of these steps are seen by mere rhetoric and do not materialize in a way expected by both sides.

³⁰Galia Golan, *Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership (Discussion Paper)*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs (Russia and Eurasia Programme), London, 1998, p. 7

The effectiveness of such cooperation is put to question, and that „in spite of the Iranian and Russian leaders’ official positive statements, the shared objectives appeared rather limited. The diplomatic rhetoric has nevertheless been very enthusiastic in order to create an illusionary proximity between the two countries.”³¹ It needs to be added that Russia and Iran continue to fiercely compete on world’s fossil fuels market, even more so after lifting Iran sanctions and continuing world markets’ slump in oil and gas prices. Moreover, Russia is not a member of OPEC, and will not be allowed to join in near future, amidst growing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Last but not least “recent political thaw in Iran is palpably helping for some of the EU states, i.e. Poland to reduce the dependence on the Russian gas, feeding into geostrategic vision of the European Union to invest all means into creating alternative transport corridors for gas and oil from the Middle East/Central Asia.”³²

b) Iran and Russia regional perspective in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea basin

Even though Iran does not hold impressive resources of Central Asia’s leading trading partners such as China, Russia, and the EU, it has somewhat succeeded in occupying a prominent place in this region, despite of years of substantial limitations due to sanctions and being perceived as a pariah state. Particularly nowadays, taking into consideration its rapprochement with Russia (its known rival in Central Asia), this influence brings up new opportunities in returning to the region stronger and with an ambition of securing numerous goals. One of them is to further overcome Iran’s international isolation. It is a win-win situation, whereby Tehran keeps on capitalizing on traditionally good relations with all post-Soviet Central Asian republics, and this balance (considering how much rivalry exists between most CA states), assures Iran’s position, being seen as an influential and independent international player. Nonetheless, Iran provides for Central Asia states perfect opportunity for diversifying their internal relations and befits multi-vector policies of these countries. It is acknowledged that “both Iran and Russia have strong strategic interests in the region. The nexus of power and influence they have created can only strengthen the implementation of their strategic goals. Hereby it is important to point out that, unlike in many other areas in the Middle East, Iran’s foreign policy “has sought ‘secular’ foreign policy, demonstrating no interest in the ‘export of revolution’ or promotion of Islamic radicalism. Factors such as the social, economic, and military/security importance in Central Asia for Iran and Iran’s relations with Russia justify the pursuit of such

³¹ Clement Therme, *Iranian-Russian Encounters, Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 383

³² *Ibidem*

policy.”³³ Both Tehran and Moscow are weary of threats due to rise of the IS and the Taleban, which become an increasing threat right on these states’, or Central Asian allies’ external borders. However, there are other factors which may in the future put the cooperation of Russia and Iran to the test. To illustrate how this partnership can be put to the test, two Central Asian states examples need examining: Turkmenistan, with its policy of active neutrality, and Tajikistan, with growing influence of the rise of Salafi branch of Islam. Importantly enough, both of these states see scenes of sporadic, yet significant border clashes with Afghan IS or Taleban fighters.

Geostrategic importance of Turkmenistan can be explained by three main factors: “Turkmenistan has become increasingly important for a) 4th world’s largest natural gas reserves b) China’s New Silk Road initiative – effectively linking China through large railways investment to Iran’s old and new sea ports as well as, via Turkey – Europe c) Sustaining the policy of active neutrality Turkmenistan is seen as a “shield” protecting the rest of Central Asia and effectively parts of Russia from the spread of the IS/Taleban threat from Afghanistan.”³⁴ Its border with Afghanistan is longest amongst all former Soviet states and more so, very close to the border with Iran prompting further concerns. Current policy of Turkmenistan’s neutrality lowers Russia leverage, not only because of Ashgabat’s reluctance to become a part of CIS or EEU (Eurasian Economic Union), but also due to Gazprom’s breaking gas import contracts for billions of dollars as element of political pressure or/and aftermath of ongoing economic crisis in Russia. This situation is beneficial to Iran “as its huge gas demands, especially in winter can be easily met by the Turkmens, and the post-sanction reality has made it easy to provide reliable source of cash for the gas from the Iranian side. Turkmen government plays very well on the volatile nature of Iran-Russia nexus and uses it for their purpose keeping more rivalry than friendship between.”³⁵

Second example is of Tajikistan, which up to this day has managed to successfully capitalize on the aftermath of peace process leading to the end of the 1992-1997 Tajik Civil War, namely joint efforts of Moscow and Tehran to end this conflict. In Tajikistan, both states’ share common security interests, understanding set of fragilities which can jeopardize fragile, especially nowadays, situation in the country where rate of human rights’ abuses is highest since its independence of 1991, and where radical Islam, drug and weapon smuggling, are taking a stronghold. Even more so, when the only moderate Islamist opposition party IPRT

³³Hooman Peimani, *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia. The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia*, Praeger, Westport, 1998, p. 32

³⁴Clement Therme, *Iranian-Russian Encounters, Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 382

³⁵Ibid. p. 383

(Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan) is being banned, leaving dangerous vacuum of power, being quickly filled in with radicalizing, clandestine and underground organizations. Additionally there is one more element for which “Tajikistan will remain important for Iran for another reason, it is a territory considered a birthplace of Persian literature and is linguistically and culturally distinctive from the other Central Asian states – Tajik language is very similar to Persian, there is a sense of affinity and pragmatic approach to counterbalance very active Turkish influence in Central Asia.”³⁶

To summarize, Russia and Iran carry common interest in securing peace and stability in the region and aim to watchfully observe movements and influence of other international players in this part of the world: China, Turkey and the United States. Indeed, it seems feasible that “Iran and Russia share a common interest in reducing American influence in Central Asia and in the Caucasus. Their common objective of maintaining stability and preventing foreign powers from involvement in regional affairs became the framework through which Tehran and Moscow built their partnership in the beginning of 1990’s.”³⁷

Moreover, both Russia and Iran, however for different reasons, will be very vigilant in the EU’s initiatives of alternative natural gas and oil transport routes, bypassing Russia or using the Caspian Sea as alternative transport corridor. All of these issues may have impact on the state of the Iran-Russia relations in near future. Also, it is important to pinpoint that Tehran and Moscow’s cooperation within organizations such as SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) will continue to gain significance, and there are even vague steps to invite Iran to join the Eurasian Economic Union – a joint project of Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. All things considered, in Central Asia, Russia and Iran are not positioned against themselves as clear rivals at this stage. They have a potential to become rivals, but for the time being they seem to act upon initiatives befitting their current political objective of rapprochement. Each of them is occupying own niche allowing Central Asian states to retain stable relationships with them, and for them to overcome their international isolation. The issue which might complicate the relationship of Iran and Russia, is of alternative gas export routes and the issue of the Caspian Sea basin demarcation between all interesting parties. Hereby, perhaps “it should be kept in mind that despite Iran’s cautious policy toward Central Asia and Russia, Iranian gradual penetration into Central Asia as well as into the Caucasus will damage Iran-Russia relations in the long run. Any Iranian success in these regions will be at the expense of Russia, as it will weaken the influence of that country in those regions. Unless either Iran and

³⁶Ibidem

³⁷Ibid. p. 379

Russia gives up its plans for the region and accepts the domination of the other as final, competition- perhaps even confrontation between Iran and Russia will in the long run be inevitable.”³⁸ This view can be contested though, taking into consideration that so far, cooperation of Russia and Iran in Central Asia creates no visible and imminent conflict of interest. Nevertheless, this inevitably negative perspective is worth taking into consideration and being kept with mind as to predict alternative scenarios should, for instance rise of radical Islam supported by states such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar, complicate balance of power in Central Asia as to weaken Russia’s and Iran’s influence. At this stage preventative diplomacy remains to be a goal of Moscow and Tehran in regards to this region. For the time being Russia sees Central Asia, South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea as its spheres of influence. Moreover, within the framework of new newly-oriented multi-vectored foreign policy and “by pursuing the idea of Neo-Eurasianism, Russia has been trying to further secure its foothold in those regions within a new framework. On the other hand, Tehran, has been trying in its long-term political plans, which see to turn the country into a major ‘regional power’, to further bolster its influence in the three aforementioned regions.”³⁹ It may as well be that Russia is not necessarily thrilled about such outcome. Although we clearly see their regional cooperation in the case of more contemporary regional conflicts (Syria), it needs to be remembered that some differences remain when looking at other regional developments.

One such issue, which might bring up significant divergences in near future is of the Caspian Sea. The ownership of resources of the Caspian Sea is another important factor that has pushed Russia and Iran closer to one another in recent years. What sustains the linkage, is that they both argue albeit for different reasons, that a regime for the joint use of resources of the sea must be established altogether will all interested regional Caspian Sea basin neighbours. The problem lies in a simple fact that international maritime conventions recognizing exclusive economic zones for different states are only applicable to open seas. However, as a matter of fact, it needs to be reminded that Caspian Sea is a sweet water lake, and not a sea as such, hereby not falling under relevant international conventions. Nevertheless, it has high geostrategic importance, perhaps not that smaller than the Persian Gulf itself.

Despite various declarations and shows of unity during the most recent (2014) IV Caspian Summit in Russia’s Astrakhan, it appears that still “the two [Iran, Russia] governments hold

³⁸Hooman Peimani, *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia. The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia*, Praeger, Westport, 1998, p. 32

³⁹Alireza Nouri, *Regional and International Assumptions and Realities in Iran-Russia Relations*, Iran Review, 9 December 2014

divergent positions on demarcations of the Caspian Sea. The Russian support for a median-line solution would severely limit Iran's share of Caspian energy resources. Despite that difference, both governments oppose development of the trans-Caspian pipeline. While united in opposing these alternative routes for Caspian energy, the two countries appear to see themselves as long-term competitors in the European market."⁴⁰ This stance may change, however, taking into consideration how strongly nowadays the EU is lobbying within Iran, capitalizing on the post-sanctions thaw in relations. Moreover, Iran and the EU may soon gain another ally – Turkmenistan, which faced with gas blackmail of Gazprom and deepening internal economic crisis has already sent signs that it will be seeking new ways of transporting its 4th world's largest natural gas reserves to EU. Therefore, Iran has a dilemma, as current discussions regarding the Caspian seabed lead to a "condominium regime together with a shared agreement concerning the seabed. Given the sensitivity of Iranian public opinion regarding this issue, Iran's authorities need to find a compromise with its neighboring states, without appearing to undermining the national interest. Indeed, the internal debate seems more emotional than rational, given the apparent absence of hydrocarbon reserves in the disputed southern part of the Caspian Sea."⁴¹ Having observed the recent events taking into consideration Iran's, as well as Azerbaijan's and Turkmenistan's reservations to Russia dominating the issue of demarcation, we can expect Caspian Sea to be most likely used as a bargaining chip at future stage of Moscow-Tehran relationship. Iran's heavy investment in building a second gas pipeline (already completed) to transport Turkmen gas ideally to the EU countries, may cast a shadow and complicate Iran-Russia relations in near future, unless Moscow's pressure on Ashgabat works (so, far it is being applied rather unsuccessfully), pushing it to reconsider its export diversification plans, instead focusing on China, which is currently Turkmenistan's largest fossil fuel importer. Nevertheless, 2016's military manoeuvres of all five Caspian Sea littoral states appear to be showing rather cohesive approach, and stability of this area carries utmost benefit to Tehran and Moscow. These words are in tune with Flanagan's opinion, whereby "Russia and Iran have tacitly agreed to avoid confrontations in the Caucasus and to support mutual goals with respect to Caspian energy routes. Nevertheless, this alignment is likely to have limited durability in light of enduring mutual suspicions and largely competing commercial and political interests."⁴²

⁴⁰Stephen J. Flanagan, *The Turkey-Russia-Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics*, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, (2013), p. 7

⁴¹ Clement Therme, *Iranian-Russian Encounters, Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 382

⁴²Stephen J. Flanagan, *The Turkey-Russia-Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics*, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, (2013), p. 8

First chapter of this thesis provided backdrop of historical context before moving closer to crucial for the entente, period between 2012-2015. Moreover, providing feasible examples of fields for involvement feeds to illustrating the gains, as well as challenges in these states' often uneasy, but at times highly beneficial bilateral relations.

Chapter II

The Iran – Russia Nexus (2012- 2015)

The following chapter will more closely examine period between 2012-2015, as one being crucial to final formation, sustaining and strengthening of the nexus between Moscow and Tehran. In effect closer, stronger bilateral ties lead to creation, or as it may be also claimed, perception of a new, strategic alliance between the two. Cordiality in recent Iran-Russia relations, especially looking at a period from 2012 onwards will be analysed in the context of diverging Russia's foreign policy goals and a place for Iran in them, at a particular time linked to the Iran Deal negotiations. This chapter aims to provide some ideas to ponder, and source some feedback on what this alliance is, how it is, as reflected and analysed by relevant literature on the subject. The timeline and reasoning behind the Iran-Russia nexus will be outlined. To reflect ideological background of this particular relationship at a particular time, it is worth acknowledging that this process worked both ways for Iran and Russia – to reiterate effectively strengthened both states' identities in a multipolar world, and especially for Moscow this “entente has been used to appear as an independent power on the international scene, and as a tool for building a multipolar world. Both Iran and Russia are against Western-style democracy and Western human rights policies. Both countries have decided to discuss cultural and religious issues in a bilateral way within the framework of diplomatic cultural cooperation, and have advocated cultural diversity, cultural and religious dialogue. They insist on shared cultural values such as the importance of family, ethics and education. They consider their dialogue as a joint cultural response to globalization and as a mean of confronting Western, globalized cultural hegemony.”⁴³

⁴³Clement Therme, *Iranian-Russian Encounters, Empires and Revolutions since 1800*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 378

- *Genesis of the Nexus: roles of Vladimir Putin and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*

Emergence of the Iran-Russia nexus is intristically linked to a few milestone political events both countries. It appears that main such impulse was Vladimir Putin's re-election and commencing his second presidential term in 2012. Not many analysts have predicted this, taking into consideration that "unexpected twists in the relationship between Moscow and Tehran have been quite normal since the 1990's. As a result, in 2012, the initial intensification of contact between Russia and Iran looked like just another fluctuation in their dialogue. However, by 2015 it seems that under certain conditions, the rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran may lead to a qualitative change in ties. The current intensity of Moscow's contact with Tehran is unprecedented in Russia's post-Soviet history."⁴⁴ How it came to this? Perhaps it would be good to more closely examine parallel event in Iranian politics, namely Iran's presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and look how such accidental made birthing of the nexus easier. However, the idea for the consolidation of political efforts between the two states appears to be somewhat paved by concrete initiatives which have started under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, especially during his second term. This period brings expansion of economic relations with Russia, especially in the field of technology (military and nuclear). It was Russia's initiative to make "nuclear and high-tech cooperation a key component of a broader relationship with Tehran. In 2000, Putin pulled out of the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (in which Russia agreed to cease supplying Iran with weapons once existing contracts were filled in 1999) – a significant step towards boosting Russia's relations with Iran. The decision cleared the way for Russian Defense Minister - Igor Sergeev to visit Tehran in December 2000 to discuss the resumption of weapons sales. Sergeev and his counterpart discussed arms sales over a ten-year period valued at more than 3\$ billion. Following Sergeev's visit to Tehran, Khatami accepted Putin's offer and made an official visit to Moscow in March 2001, during which he indicated his desire to purchase more diesel-powered submarines in an effort to boost naval power in the Persian Gulf. In October 2004, a senior Russian Foreign Ministry official in charge of implementing policy towards Iran expressed that Iran was the only state in the greater Middle East that was rapidly increasing its economic, scientific, technological and military potential."⁴⁵ It then seems, that the circumstances in the field of trade and exchange of technology have been rather beneficial in order to push with taking extra

⁴⁴Nikolay Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalisation of Russian-Iranian Relations*, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 2015, p. 3

⁴⁵Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran. The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2013, pp. 87-88

steps in near future. Also, potential for rapprochement was closely linked to those two states' relations with Western powers at that time. Dr Maaïke Warnaar, author of a comprehensive account of Iran's foreign policy under Ahmadinejad makes a couple of interesting points. First, she correctly pinpoints that "Ahmadinejad's presidency coincided with an emerging trend, in which United States' hegemony was cautiously challenged by emerging and aspiring powers. Western efforts to isolate Iran created opportunities for these powers to give shape to their autonomous course. Some of these powers criticized Western policies, while others explicitly defied Western attempts to isolate Iran, and sought friendly ties with the Islamic Republic as evidence of their independence. This created limited yet important international opportunities for the Islamic Republic."⁴⁶ Therefore, it seems such opportunities were quickly recognised and snatched by both Moscow and Tehran. There are two important milestones for formation of the nexus, coming from the side of Moscow, which Warnaar recognises poignantly. One relates to increasingly demanding Russian foreign policy, whereby "rather than expressing the wish of taking the place of the West, Russian officials were emphasizing the need for a more equal division of power between the West and Russia."⁴⁷ Second one confirms that Moscow sensed very well, and quickly, how the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, so controversial in the West will become potentially binding and overarching internal political divisions at a time, and so "Russian officials spoke out in support of Iranian peaceful nuclear development. For the Russian Government, relations with Iran were a test and a symbol of Russia's strategic independence in its foreign policy and its ability to stand up to Western and other international pressures, something it has aspired to for a long time."⁴⁸ During, and thanks to the presidency of Ahmadinejad and his controversial policies and statements, Iran has once again come about as a number one pariah state. The tensions with the West regarding its unwillingness to cooperate on the nuclear issue were escalating and numerous new sanctions were imposed on the country, further contributing to economic deterioration prompted by already highly populist policies of Tehran. Such outcome was also made easier due to substantially high oil prices at that time. However, Iran was falling under greater pressure of the international community and it quickly recognised, correctly, that Russia's help, especially with its UN Security Council veto power may come across very handy in harsher times. Iran has ventured on a path of avoiding provoking Russia and otherwise chose to appease it, its ambition then was to answer these questions: "can Iran afford to antagonize a galvanized Russia by being seen to be acting

⁴⁶Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy During Ahmadinejad. Ideology and Actions*, Palgrave MacMillian, 2013, p. 64

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 75

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 77

against Moscow's interests? Second, in the absence of other high-value military partners, can Iran survive without Moscow's support for its rearmament drive and its potential support in the Security Council?"⁴⁹

Second Ahmadinejad's term (2009-2013) marks further decline in Iran's economy and simultaneously first signs of slow down in Russia due to falling oil and gas prices on world markets. One prominent Russian Iran expert- Vladimir Sazhin, described the relations between Moscow and Tehran in the span of 1991-2011 as 'watchful partnership'⁵⁰. Simultaneously, another prominent Russian political analyst has argued that "by 2012 the Russian authorities had worked out an unofficial diplomatic strategy that involved balancing between Iran and its political opponents – not only the United States, but also Israel and some of the Gulf Cooperation Council members. The Russian government understood that any alliance of strategic partnership with Iran would inevitably worsen their relations with the world's leading countries. In spite of what has been predicted by analysts, watchful partnership between Iran and Russia changed into something else precisely in 2012. Perhaps this lack of reaction of other international players to then accelerated Moscow-Tehran entente has encouraged both, especially Moscow to push further. This kind of more tactic than strategic is being often attributed to Russia's actions: take a step forward, and if there's no reaction, take another one, and so on. It is further argued that a reset in Iran-Russia relations is linked to Putin's vision of the priorities of foreign policy affected by two main factors: 1) disenchantment with attempts to improve U.S.-Russia relations 2) fresh tensions with the West over escalating war in Syria."⁵¹ Additionally, Moscow felt slightly humiliated, and increasingly "frustrated by the fact that its generally pro-Western position on the Libyan conflict received no positive feedback either in Washington or Brussels. Dissatisfied in the previous attempts to bridge the divide with the West, the three-term president of Russia was determined – more than ever before – to develop relations with non-Western countries."⁵² A proof of the increasing Iran-Russia cooperation came quickly enough. In 2008, two months into his second term, Ahmadinejad and Putin met at the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). They produced a statement which, "clearly, and publicly called for further development of the Russo-Iranian relations. With an effect of a snowball other high-profile meetings followed, i.e. Russia's FM Sergei Lavrov visit to Tehran merely a week [!] after Putin's Shanghai meeting. The speed of

⁴⁹Anoushirvan Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran. Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 36

⁵⁰Personal communication with the author

⁵¹Nikolay Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Moscow, 2015, p. 8

⁵²*Ibidem*

mutual engagement reiterated readiness for broadening the political agenda, and included Moscow's will for full cooperation over situation in Syria and Afghanistan."⁵³ To sum up this period and move to the most crucial forming the nexus period of 2012-2015, it can be said that dialogue has evolved in the years to come. What pushed Iran closer to Moscow during Ahmadinejad's presidency was a set of factors one of them being "the viewpoint of Iran's official foreign policy discourse, [that] Russia and China were more favourable partners for the Islamic Republic than the United States and or European Union. Despite Iran's troubled history with the former Soviet Union, these countries did not share the stigma of 'arrogant' or 'hegemonic' powers."⁵⁴ This way of thinking was on par with other elements of ideology of the Iranian government at that time, which managed to capitalize on merging the Islamic Revolution ideals with re-igniting pride of its nation deeply engraved in its ancient pride and history. All these things have combined in Iran's systemic propaganda of change within the Islamic Republic, with its example – right to peaceful nuclear technology development. Such actions were needed to increase governments' legitimacy. Tehran kept insisting on its nuclear development, and further international sanctions did not stop its relentless attempts to keep pushing on with it. In spite of many anti-Russian sentiments still well-alive in Iranians' memory, governments from Ahmadinejad onwards chose to not drag them away from slumber into daylight and rather pragmatically further engage into more dialogue, and more understanding with Moscow. Iranian government preferred to focus on issues related, for instance, to Bushehr atomic power plant built by Russia, or to secure possible arms deals, much to Moscow's liking. 2013 presidential elections put an end to presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and it Moscow has been closely watching first steps of the newly-elected president – Hassan Rouhani.

- ***Consolidation of the Iran-Russia Nexus – incumbent presidency of Hassan Rouhani***

„China, India and Russia are engaged in intense competition, primarily with the Western bloc, in a concerted effort to secure more prominent global roles. (...) This has led to the gradual rise of a revisionist approach to foreign policy. Nation-states regardless of their current position and power, now seek to enhance their stature and achieve their goals through a carefully balanced combination of cooperation and competition. Multilateralism will play a central role in Iran's external relations. Iran will also expand and consolidate its amicable ties with other major powers such as China, India and Russia.“⁵⁵

Few weeks after the presidential elections, Farideh Farhi painted a painfully realistic picture of

⁵³Ibid. p. 10

⁵⁴Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy During Ahmadinejad. Ideology and Actions*, Palgrave MacMillian, 2013, p. 131

⁵⁵Mohammad J. Zarif, *What Iran Really Wants*, Foreign Affairs, May 2014, Vol. 93, No. 3 (2015), pp. 49-59

the upcoming presidency by saying that „Hassan Rouhani’s election victory took many commentators by surprise, but the period of conciliation will not last long. [Nevertheless] this may still be the most important election in the Islamic Republic’s history, because it has reminded people that it is after all possible to express popular opinion through elections.”⁵⁶ No matter what, this event in modern Iranian history is important, with its most palpable result delivered in July of 2015 in Vienna. By signing the Iran Deal with P5+1, Rouhani has created a surplus of opportunities and challenges, and to large extend fulfilled a wish of its nation, in spite of many outstanding issues and often lack of patience with pace of what has followed after signing this deal – namely, improving Iran’s relationship with the outside world and dragging it away from pariah state labelling. What can be said with large dose of certainty is that signing the deal is a milestone event in history of Iran relations with other international players, and that it would not happen without Russia’s strong position in the negotiations- this being partial to the then already strong and visible to outside world, Iran-Russia entente. Evolution of dialogue between the two continued way into Rouhani’s presidency and, in 2014 “up to a point when in September, Sergei Lavrov even called the Islamic Republic a ‘natural ally’ of Russia in the struggle against religious extremists in the Middle East. All of these gestures were supposed to demonstrate that, currently, Iran is something more than just a southern neighbour to Russia”.⁵⁷ This was a strong declaration, essentially meaning that Russia will not leave Iran alone in need. Taking aside the issue of Syria, both countries needed each other during, then already facilitated, multilateral talks of tackling the issue of settling down Iran’s nuclear issue. This has become a priority of Rouhani’s government and considering Iran’s dire economic situation, actions had to be taken quickly and effectively. In order to fulfill promises made to the Iranian voters, foreign policy needed a reboot. Breaking with predecessor’s Islamic Revolution export discourse, Rouhani has prioritized breaking with antagonization of Iran’s foreign policy and aimed to regain Iran’s position as a powerful player in the region, be it politically or militarily, in order to return Iran to a status of a regional and respected power. This symbiosis between the economy and Iran’s foreign policy has continued up to this day, with support of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. In line with what Kozhanov argues “the transfer of presidential power in Iran, from Ahmadinejad to Rouhani, did not significantly affect the trend of deepening relations. Putin and Rouhani met on the sidelines of the fourth summit of the Caspian Sea littoral states on September 29, 2014. They

⁵⁶Farideh Farhi, *Why Rohani*, London Review of Books, London, 18 August 2013

⁵⁷Nikolay Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Moscow, 2015 p. 9

also held negotiations in Bishkek, on the sidelines of the SCO summit in 2013; on the sidelines of a summit for the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (on May 23, 2014); and in Dushanbe, again at an SCO summit (on September 12, 2014). The Bishkek visit was Rouhani's first foreign trip as president, and it was taken as a sign of his government's interest in strategic ties with Russia and China."⁵⁸ This passage proves an intensification in bilateral Iran-Russia relations and portrays tempo of political agenda development. However, also from then on, considering gradual opening up of the Iranian market for foreign investors and Russia desperately looking for new economic partnerships amidst its own crisis due to sanctions and low oil prices, Moscow ventured out to seek potential economic benefits of the rapprochement. On August 5 2014 document on principles of trade and economic agenda between Iran and Russia was adopted: "Putin welcomed the document's adoption and said it was necessary to bolster the new legal framework with concrete substance."⁵⁹ All in all, it has become apparent that "Rouhani has made a special effort to improve ties with Russia. Though the two neighbours have never had close or strategic ties, regional and international developments have paved the way for a new relationship."⁶⁰

In previous passages we have seen how the Iran-Russia nexus was bolstered during first, as a prelude during Ahmadinejad presidency, then went 'full-swing' when Rouhani came to power. Now, it seems important to leave "how" behind, and provide some explanation as to – why?

- *Rationale Behind the Iran-Russia Nexus*

At this stage of the analysis, it appears logical to shed more light on possible reasonings for the intensity in bilateral Iran-Russia relations between 2012-2015. The drivers are many and differ. For instance, some argue that for the Islamic Republic "this new partnership is driven largely by internal political competition between Iran's moderate pragmatists and its hard-line conservatives. Iran's pragmatists have long pressed their country to follow what they call the China model: liberalizing the economy and opening up diplomatically while keeping the political space constricted. The China model took root during the administration of former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who initiated limited free-market-oriented

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 9

⁵⁹Ibidem

⁶⁰Bijan Khajepour, *Iran-Russia Relations After Nuclear Deal*, Al-Monitor, 12 July 2015

economic reforms in the 1990s and also sought to reduce conflict with the United States. This line of thinking contributed to the nuclear negotiations and eventual deal by his protégé, President Hassan Rouhani.”⁶¹ This could be contested, because at least up to now, no major rehaul of Iranian foreign policy is being observed, and it is widely acknowledged that the Supreme Leader is in favour of the Iran-Russia rapprochement. Biggest fear of the conservatives lies in normalizing ties with the United States, yet so far Rouhani’s government has been extremely cautious not to provoke some elements of conservative establishment, such as IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps). Tabaar in his further analysis points to an interesting fact. Paradoxically, Russia came across as source of ‘inspiration’ for the conservatives as “they have come, instead, to favor what they view as President Vladimir Putin’s Russia model—that is, securitizing the state and the economy to prevent a U.S.-supported regime change. In this model, the regime introduces limited “privatization” and “liberalization” intended to largely benefit the regime’s loyalists, while maintaining a solid anti-American stance.”⁶² Since so far, benefits of the economic rapprochement don’t bring as much fruit as expected and “it appears the apparent nexus hasn’t been followed by the flood of investment like in the case of Italy, Germany or China, however, there are opportunities on both sides. In terms of the Russian businesses, they sure have plans. However, a number of companies somewhat rashly believe that positive results can be achieved through intergovernmental channels. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Those who are already working in Iran are looking for their own sources of money to finance their goals and tasks. This is the right way. With the exception of Tempbank and Mir Business Bank, Russian banks still do not work with Iran. In order to invest, businesspeople, at their own peril and without external crediting, open small-scale wholesale trade warehouses to sell pipes, for example. In 2014, Russia supported non-commodity export. But no longer. Every EU country compensates Western companies for 95 per cent of their export costs, but Russia does not.”⁶³

Amidst uncertainty of the economic rationale behind the Iran-Russia nexus, focus fell on putting it into test during the ongoing conflict in Syria. The reasoning behind closer Iran-Russia cooperation in the military field is perhaps a way of examining how Russia would help Iran to keep Assad in power, as his fall from grace is considered by the conservatives in Tehran as a potential boost to the reformists’ camp. Combination of Iranian deeply-rooted

⁶¹Mohammad A. Tabaar, *Iran’s Russian Turn. The Start of a New Alliance*, *Foreign Affairs*, November 2015

⁶² *Ibidem*

⁶³ Elena Melkumian, *Iran – A Stumbling Block for Russia and the Gulf Countries*, *RIAC Bulletin*, 31 August 2015

intelligence in the field and committed elite army commandos, paired with Russia's advanced military and army bases on Syria's soil seem to be so far, reassuring enough, as the conflict rages on up to this day. Some predictions of how this might or might not work were made by Elena Melkumian, whereby she acknowledges that "Russian-Iranian relations in the military field have a long history. Russia, together with China, became the main suppliers of weapons to Islamic Republic when the Western countries refused to develop military ties with it after the Islamic revolution. Iran is the main strategic ally of Russia in the Middle East. The two countries have similar positions concerning important regional issues: they support the Assad regime in Syria, they criticize air strikes against ISIL in Syria without coordination with the official powers of this country, and they are against the use of force in Yemen."⁶⁴ Last to be forgotten here, is the United States factor. So far it seems that Russia is aiming at preventing too close rapprochement of Tehran with Washington, partly through close cooperation in Syria and protecting the Assad regime. It can be also said that so far it is succeeding, at least partially, as Iran is trying hard to convolute rapprochement message with Washington in giving green light for increased economic ties i.e. Boeing aircraft sales to Iran, and avoids direct declarations in the spotlight of international community.

This was one example of Iranian perspective. Russia's increased interest in bulking this nexus' can be attributed to a period linked to the first events of the Arab Spring in 2012 "when, in mid-2012, the Russian authorities decided to intensify contact with the Islamic Republic, they were seriously concerned with their shrinking political and economic presence in the region. Moscow considered Tehran one of its last footholds remaining in the Middle East and tried to secure its position there."⁶⁵ However, taking into consideration amount of mistrust to Russia already often in history treating Iran instrumentally, Moscow had to tame Iran and provide it with some concrete reassurance. When, some time prior to signing the nuclear deal, additional sanctions were imposed on Iran by the UN Security Council "Moscow unofficially supported the activities of Russian businesses in Iran. The Kremlin looked the other way when Russian businesses found loopholes in the U.S. and EU sanctions regime aimed at their Iranian partners. This, in turn created positive feedback in Tehran. Shortly before the end of Ahmadinejad's second term, the two sides had started to talk about the possibility of resuming exports of the S-300 Russian missile system to Iran." This wish has materialized after signing the Iran Deal.

⁶⁴ Ibidem

⁶⁵ Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Moscow, 2015, p. 10

Russia has kept its promise and showed that this time it is not playing cat and mouse. Synergy of the Iran-Russia nexus has also prompted Moscow to use this opportunity and lure Tehran beyond the bilateral level and has been trying to take Iran on board multilaterally, and convince it (so far, successfully) to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in near future. Moreover, Tehran is currently eyeing possibility of joining Moscow's 'alternative' to EU- Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Iran has, to put it diplomatically, expressed its interest in joining.⁶⁶ However, taking into consideration the EU's own diplomatic strategy and making Iran a top priority within its European External Action Service (EEAS) pilot project of Iran-focused Economic Diplomacy, this appears highly unlikely, as for when 2016 is at stake.

Taking into consideration the pace and intensity of the Iran-Russia relations between 2012-2015, it can be judged that for Russia at least, a strong division has developed: Iran on one hand, and the rest of the Middle East on the other. At current economic crisis' times for Moscow, it is actively trying to pursue its cooperation with Tehran based on economic/energy-related goals. On the other hand, by appearing to the other major world powers as the state actively trying to appease Iran's non-proliferation goals, it gains much needed relief from constant bashing and indeed receives some credit for its major role in P5+1 Vienna negotiations. It is a very smart move, because on one hand thanks to the Iran Deal, Russia has enhanced its capabilities as an international actor which actually gets things done. On the other, Iran without a clandestine nuclear programme and an atomic bomb lies in a strategic interest of Moscow. In previous paragraphs examples of actions, and strategies behind the two states' nexus was shown. Thanks to the increased activities in bilateral relations of Iran and Russia, the nexus has gained legitimacy within the framework of their internal policies, but also abroad. Nevertheless, it is not free from potential constraints.

- *Impediments of the Iran-Russia Nexus*

The last part of this chapter is committed to analysing potential of obstacles in the Iran-Russia entente. Both Russia and Iran must tread very carefully, taking into consideration regional and international contexts. For Moscow, it is important not to fall out with its important ally in the Middle East- Israel. Many analysts argue that "Moscow will most likely harm relations with its 'silent partner' – whose position on the annexation of Crimea, on Western sanctions against

⁶⁶An interesting article shedding more light on such prospect can be found in Tehran Times: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/403405/Iran-s-membership-in-Eurasian-Economic-Union-may-serve-as-economic>

Russia and on Russian air forces in Syria corresponds to Russian interests. Recent statements by Israeli officials demonstrated concerns about growing Russian–Iranian cooperation in Syria and beyond. Previously, Israel tolerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran as long as it was not considered as a threat to the national security of the country. Yet, recently, Israeli officials have begun to openly worry that the Russian government may begin to close its eyes to anti-Israeli moves by Tehran. Although these speculations seem to have little basis, active Russian support of Tehran in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia would almost certainly be considered in Israel as further proof of the growing Russian-Iranian alliance.⁶⁷ Moreover, as reiterated previously, considering its interest in good relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, it seems that so far Moscow has somewhat managed not to lose trust of the those international players. Russia has made a very smart move when during 2015’s diplomatic spat between Tehran and Riyadh (due to a tragic Mina Stampede in Saudi Arabia where around 460 Iranian citizens have perished) it kept moderate and avoided takings ones’ side, instead offering both states’ leaders personal condolences during 2015 UN General Assembly.

There is a lot at stake for Russia in keeping the nexus in good shape, as “Moscow invested diplomatic and economic effort in improving the dialogue with Tehran, including the opening of a credit line. It cannot afford to lose these dividends considering Russia’s economic dire straits. The Russian authorities are desperate to retain Iran within its sphere of influence and avoid any drift westwards. Without Iranian ground forces fighting the opponents of the Assad regime, it will be difficult for Moscow to attain its goals in Syria – Russia needs Iran’s military and political support to compel the Syrian opposition and its sponsors to negotiate with Bashar al-Assad.”⁶⁸

It seems that both the Iranians and Russians are fully aware of challenges to the nexus. Both try to shift within limits of diplomatic balance and not fully exclude similar kind of cooperation with their major allies. Current challenges to this entente may suggest that, especially in case of Syria, Iran and Russia have reached a stalemate, entrenched in options which may lead to losing not only influence but also economic potential. This watchful partnership is under constant scrutiny of Iran and Russia’s regional allies and opponents but so far, up to 2015 it seemed that none of them have expressed full-blown reservations.

⁶⁷Nikolay Kozhanov, *The Limits of Russian-Iranian Cooperation*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/19210#>

⁶⁸Ibidem

All things concerned the predictions are that the Iran-Russia Nexus will remain limited. To sum up, there are six legitimate reasons for which this cooperation may not yet reach a full, strategic alliance: 1) “neither Russia nor Iran is interested in a fully-fledged alliance. Moscow has no wish to be part of a pro-Shia camp confronting the GCC-led Sunni coalition. This would affect Russian security as its 17 million-strong Muslim population is largely Sunni.”⁶⁹ 2) “Tehran is also concerned about being involved in the wider Russian confrontation with the West while it seeks European technologies and money.”⁷⁰ 3) “Moscow guaranteed Israel that Russian actions in Syria would not pose a threat to Israel. This, of course, is contrary to Iran’s interests. Iran will attempt to increase its presence in southern Syria to have better access to Hezbollah and the Israeli borders.”⁷¹ 4) “while largely supporting Russian air strikes, some of the Iranian political elite is concerned that Russia may hijack Tehran’s own successes in Syria. It is largely due to Iranian support that the Syrian regime has managed to survive until now. Russian military involvement has overshadowed Iranian assistance.”⁷² 5) a part of the Syrian elite welcomes the Russian presence as a means to balance Tehran. This will inevitably concern the Iranians whose military leaders do not see Assad as just a mere foreign policy tool. On 3 November, the head of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, said Russia ‘may not care if Assad stays in power as we do’.⁷³ 6) “The sixth and final reason Russo-Iranian cooperation is limited is the Iranians expect a pay-off from Syria when the conflict is over. Now, they will need to share that with Moscow. This could undermine any revival of the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Mediterranean gas pipeline project that Tehran wants but is a concern for Russia. Russia and Iran probably understand the limits to their cooperation in Syria. And so far, military coordination between the two has been patchy. Neither are in a hurry to create joint command structures, and in most cases, they simply prefer to take parallel paths to the same destination.”⁷⁴

This chapter was largely committed to showing rationale and concrete results of the Iran-Russia nexus between 2012-2015. Taking into consideration potential obstacles and shedding more light on both states’ regional entrenchment’s consequences was aimed to showcase potential threats to this nexus’ future, and share predictions of its limitations. It seems that despite both various endeavours to further improve their alliance, they are ought to first overcome numerous

⁶⁹Ibidem

⁷⁰Ibidem

⁷¹Ibidem

⁷²Ibidem

⁷³Ibidem

⁷⁴Ibidem

challenges and focus on practical implementation of plans and sometimes overblown declarations.

Conclusion

In order to understand the reasoning, genesis, and other factors influencing the formation of the Iran-Russia nexus between 2012-2015, this thesis looked at dynamics of events and processes which helped constituting the development of bilateral relations between these two states. By providing historical backdrop of Moscow and Tehran's peculiar relationship, the aim was to signify that nature of their current relationship is, in spite of its current important strategic dimension, not free from psycho-historic reservations prone to constant scrutiny, suspiciousness and vigilance. What is crucial in the context of this thesis is the fact, that despite many obstacles, practical implications and facts on the ground provided by this work, contributed to understanding that their bilateral relations are stronger than ever before in history. It has been a few years now, including three crucial forming years (2012-2015), that it is possible to observe consistent and consequent development of the nexus, taking into consideration various factors which may impede its speed and radius. Reflecting upon major drivers of this process is included in this work, together with case studies of examples cooperation which may also become a source of tension in the future. Moreover, this work serves as a road map to the very process of formation of the strategic Iran-Russia nexus, based on showcasing particular times in modern states' history and focusing on their leaders' and governments' political priorities as major contributing factors. In such a way, milestones such as particular elections, or politicians behind nexus with their often direct influence on Iran-Russia relationships' was also reflected, in order to prove how dependent are the vectors of these states' foreign policies on simultaneous internal policy fluctuations.

All things concerned, the significance with which geopolitics have affected the nexus and will continue to do so is not to be underestimated as „for all of Moscow and Tehran's lofty public pronouncements about friendship and cooperation, Russia's Iran policy is ultimately driven by its global interests: namely, reducing West's influence and raising Russia's, even at the expense of security. Iran's interests largely coincide with these goals, so cooperation with Tehran fits well with Moscow's agenda. Putin's repeated calls for a 'multipolar' approach, are one many

means of achieving these aims, rather than a genuine interest in multilateralism. Both countries also oppose any attempts to support democratic movements in the Middle East. Most notably, they continue to back the Assad regime in Syria and hold similar views on the Taliban in Afghanistan.”⁷⁵ Here we can see how coinciding sets of interests may flourish due to particular geopolitical influencing factors. However, it is observed that at the same time, or the Islamic Republic, the nexus with Moscow carries many potential risks and could also backfire through diverging on specific objectives. Many outstanding issues between Iran and Russia need further careful monitoring: 1) Iran and Russia remain competitors on the energy market. 2) Russia aims to remain main gateway for export of Central Asia’s vast natural resources and in the light of Iran’s post JCPOA rapprochement with the West it may start seeing Iran as a threat. 3) Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East may cause future repercussions of Moscow, which also sees southern neighbourhood’s expansion as one of prerogatives of its multi-vectored foreign policy. 4) Russia will remain cautious and suspicious over Iran’s post-revolutionary Islamic ideology, taking into consideration its already fragile set of challenges (i.e. rise of Islamic extremism). 5) Russia will tread carefully with Iran and may be willing to compromise the nexus in order to broaden its cooperation with the Gulf Arab states, especially for development of lucrative arms trade deals. 6) Russia’s policy towards Iran will be dependent on the former’s dynamics of the relations with the West.

This thesis has aimed to paint a broader picture – whether or not Moscow can afford, or not, or is willing, or not, to instigate Cold War 2.0 with the West, it will continue to closely observe Tehran’s current, ongoing rapprochement with the West and act accordingly to its strategic interest.

A target for analysis of sources in this thesis, was bound to also reflect upon a recurring tension between Moscow and Tehran. This might be either orchestrated in order to test waters of other foreign powers’ reaction to such outcome, or may be a simple accidental of set of factors needed for cooling down bilateral relations on different levels. It appears unlikely that Russia in its post-2012-2015 Iran detente period will in the end allow a situation, whereby Tehran acquires enough power to become its direct competitor in the region. So far it seems that watchful, yet fruitful partnership (i.e. Syria, JCPOA), benefits both better than fierce competition full of deterrent rhetoric. The reason for which Russia is more than before

⁷⁵Anna Borschchevskaya, *How Russia Views the Iran Nuclear Talks*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 12 March 2015

interested in sustaining such intensity in bilateral contacts lies also in a fact, that it started realising China's growing influence in the region. Taking into consideration Beijing's One Belt One Road Initiative, Moscow may feel threatened to be encompassed by China, from its Central Asia borders, up to South Caucasus. Namely this region, in particular South Ossetia, bound to Tehran by its cultural and linguistic inclinations, is inclined to prove a source of potential glitches for the rapprochement with Russia in the future.

Furthermore, as indicated earlier in this work, the Nuclear Deal followed by JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), has played major role as an event giving impetus and effectively encouraging Iran and Russia to take more blunt steps in order to further bind their strategic detente: "Putin added in a statement released by the Kremlin that the deal means that its 'bilateral relations with Iran will receive a new impetus and will no longer be influenced by external factors.'"⁷⁶ This has shown that both countries have benefitted from resolving the nuclear imbroglio, and both emerged as more empowered international players, as a result of its success. In this sense, both states, but especially Russia, has been trying to emphasize global and regional roles of the achievement. Russian FM Sergey Lavrov, in his press statement concluding the Vienna negotiations has reiterated: "I'd be remiss not to mention the broader context of what happened. The solutions will, first, play an important role in strengthening the non-proliferation regime. Second, they will of course, have a healing effect on the overall situation in the Middle East, North Africa and the Persian Gulf. Third, once this agreement is implemented, it will be possible to tackle other issues in that region."⁷⁷ These two Russian politicians' statements conclude that the deal with Iran is simultaneously a culmination of the nexus marking a start of multi-dimensional strategy. Opinions on Russia-Iran relations as a fool's bargain appear to be, however not without sense, still quite pre-mature at this particular time, taking into consideration many examples of fruitful cooperation within this strategic alliance.

Closer to modern times, as reflected by the presidency of Hassan Rouhani earlier in this work, and as a result for the up-to-date Iran, one of the conclusive important elements, which needs to be accentuated here, is how unequivocal the support for the rapprochement process with Russia has been on both sides of the complex, often murky Iranian political establishment.

⁷⁶Bijan Khajepour, *Iran-Russia Relations After Nuclear Deal*, *AI-Monitor*, 12 July 2015

⁷⁷Maxim A. Suchkov, *Essays on Russian Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and the Middle East*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, 2015, p. 81

Cordiality of the personal relationship of Vladimir Putin and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are one such proof. Moreover, as Tabaar points out: “To Khamenei, Putin is now a more reliable partner than ever before. Putin currently shares a similar fear of U.S.-instigated color revolutions.”⁷⁸ Even more compelling argument lies in a fact that “in terms of Iran’s internal politics, the expanding partnership with Russia could strengthen the IRGC’s regional power, which often translates into more internal leverage. If Putin’s partnership in Damascus can help Khamenei maintain the current balance of power in Tehran for the short term, Iran’s hard-liners may have enough time to engineer the return of anti-Americanism. It is possible that the Iranian population, particularly its youth, will quickly feel betrayed by the United States in the post-nuclear-deal era. Or so Khamenei hopes.”⁷⁹ The last sentence of this vision is rather bleak and ominous, but symbolizes well how the nexus can be used, in both states, for engineering own internal policies’ dynamics.

It seems that, at least for the time being, Moscow needs Tehran and vice versa. How will the relations between Iran and Russia develop is not easy to predict. As this thesis showed, economic, geopolitical and other factors will continue to play a role. A question is how well both Moscow and Tehran can learn from their previous mistakes, and further compromise in order to sustain developed nexus of power and influence? This detente so far, amongst other things, is used as a measure of counterbalance against the West. Also it seems that so far this very nexus has remained pretty versatile in terms of its conditionality, which does not necessarily preclude its strategic dimension.

What may become factor in helping sustaining the Iran-Russia nexus are namely many similarities in terms of ideology, especially in its shared perceptions of the West, in particular the idea of both states’ prominent place in the multipolar world due to their specific cultures’ moral values, as well as their staunch anti-Americanism. Nevertheless, “Iran shall not fail to recognize the fact that, just as in the post-Cold War era, Russia and the West would be willing to make deals at Iran’s expense.”⁸⁰ It seems though, that Iran has, especially under Rouhani’s administration, learnt a very important lesson of avoidance of its previous foreign policy mistakes, namely antagonizing Russia. Such policies of many of its predecessors, have in previous times contributed to weakening its stance with the Western powers and other main

⁷⁸ Mohammad A. Tabaar, *Iran’s Russian Turn. The Start of a New Alliance*, Foreign Affairs, 12 November 2015

⁷⁹ Ibidem

⁸⁰ Shireen Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era. Resisting the New International Order*, Praeger, Santa Barbara, 2012, p. 116

international players. Now, by sustaining interest in keeping the nexus with Russia alive, Tehran continues to work on increasing its geostrategic importance.

So far by analysing the nexus in this work, it seems that Iran has played its cards right. For instance, its August 2016's decision to open its Hamedan air base and Iranian airspace for Russia's jets Syria military operations (albeit this decision was later revoked), shows that there is not only a substantive upgrade of the Iran-Russia nexus, but also, qualitative boost, not to be omitted. Is this nexus a triumph of Tehran and Moscow, or merely a fool's bargain and history repeating itself? These questions will be answered with time, and taking into consideration particularly tense geopolitical situation in the world right now, we may be able to find out this sooner than later. All things concerned, in further fruitful analyses and assessments of the Iran-Russia nexus, it is important to keep with mind its situational vector dynamics and observe development, or lackof, of a coherent strategy.

Finally, to feed into answering to how this nexus can be further sustained it is important to provide an example of actions both states could possibly take in order to preserve and/or expand the 2012-2015 nexus: "Both states seem to be willing in keeping alive this 'watchful partnership'. Yet in order to use the chance given to them, Moscow and Tehran need to resolve issues whose natures have little to do with the roles of third parties. Namely, Russia and Iran will need to take a deeper look at their own potential to develop bilateral relations. They have to determine to what extent and in what areas real economic cooperation between them is possible and in what political spheres their collaboration can be effective – in other words, where they can go beyond mere consultations. Without clear answers to these questions, further progress on the dialogue between Moscow and Tehran is hardly possible."⁸¹

Indeed, many experts draw up different scenarios. Whatever the analysis, it must be reiterated that the future of the Moscow-Tehran entente will continue to depend on set of external factors. Also, there are doubts as to whether building a truly strategic alliance will ever be possible. Taking into consideration many elements reflected in this thesis, it can be said that at least for now, all things considered, Russia and Iran have either already reached a critical moment for the such 'true' strategic definiment.

⁸¹Nikolay Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, Moscow, 2015 p. 17

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