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IRANIAN POLITICIANS' AND ACADEMICS' VIEWS ON THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN IRAN AND RUSSIA

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Abstract. *Introduction.* Iranian politicians and academics describe the current relations between Iran and Russia in various ways. Research on the nature of the relationship between the two countries has produced conflicting findings and results. This research aimed to explore the perceptions of Iranian politicians and academics regarding the feasibility of forming a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia and to explain the reasons behind their similarities and differences. *Methods and materials.* Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted using purposive, non-probability sampling among 30 respondents, including politicians and academics, from July to September 2024. The in-depth interviews were coded using an inductive method. Using thematic analysis, these codes were identified based on superficially shared meanings and constant comparison, categorized into themes and sub-themes, and then interpreted. *Analysis.* Two themes emerged in the interviewees' perceptions: the first saw a strategic partnership as possible. It was divided into two sub-themes: supporters and opponents of the realization of this partnership so far. The second theme perceived a strategic partnership between the two countries as impossible. It was divided into two sub-themes regarding the feasibility of alternative names for this relationship, such as strategic relations or cooperation. *Results.* The researcher concluded that the different perceptions within Iran's political and academic circles stemmed from politicians' pragmatism and greater sensitivity to Iran's interests in maintaining good relations with Russia under international sanctions. However, due to their more independent and deeper understanding of empirical evidence and greater distance from policymaking centers, academics of Iran primarily did not consider a strategic partnership with Russia feasible.

Key words: Iran – Russia relations, cooperation, strategic partnership, policy, academia, perception.

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ВЗГЛЯД ИРАНСКИХ ПОЛИТИКОВ И УЧЕНЫХ НА СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОЕ ПАРТНЕРСТВО МЕЖДУ ИРАНОМ И РОССИЕЙ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Иранские политики и ученые по-разному описывают нынешние отношения между Ираном и Россией. Исследования по этой теме характеризуются противоречивыми выводами и результатами. Данная статья направлена на изучение представлений иранских политиков и ученых о целесообразности формирования стратегического партнерства между Россией и Ираном и объяснение причин их сходства или различий. *Методы и материалы.* Полуструктурированные глубинные интервью были проведены с использованием целенаправленной неслучайной выборки среди 30 респондентов из числа политиков и ученых в период с июля по сентябрь 2024 года. Глубинные интервью были зашифрованы с использованием индуктивного метода, и с помощью тематического анализа эти коды были определены на основе поверхно-

стных общих значений и постоянного сравнения, затем разделены на темы и подтемы и проинтерпретированы. *Анализ.* В восприятии респондентов выявились две темы. В рамках первой стратегическое партнерство рассматривалось как возможное и было разделено на две подтемы: сторонников и противников реализации этого партнерства на данный момент. В рамках второй темы стратегическое партнерство между двумя странами расценивалось как невозможное. Также эта тема была разделена на две подтемы, касающиеся возможности использования альтернативных определений для таких отношений, как стратегические отношения или сотрудничество. *Результаты.* Автор статьи пришел к выводу, что различия восприятия стратегического партнерства с Россией в политических и академических кругах Ирана обусловлены прагматизмом политиков и большей чувствительностью к интересам Ирана в поддержании хороших отношений с Россией в условиях международных санкций. Однако из-за более независимого и глубокого понимания эмпирических данных и большой удаленности от центров принятия решений представители академической науки Ирана не посчитали осуществимым стратегическое партнерство с Россией.

Ключевые слова: ирано-российские отношения, сотрудничество, стратегическое партнерство, политика, академическое сообщество, восприятие.

Цитирование. Хаваринежад С. Взгляд иранских политиков и ученых на стратегическое партнерство между Ираном и Россией // Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 4, История. Регионоведение. Международные отношения. – 2025. – Т. 30, № 4. – С. 199–209. – (На англ. яз.). – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2025.4.17>

Introduction. Relations between Iran and Russia have fluctuated constantly. Their recently increased cooperation has been influenced by the two countries' shared stance on international misrecognition and common threat perceptions [11, p. 107].

While the official political environment (media and ruling politicians) of these two countries often portrays a positive image of constructive relations between Tehran and Moscow, their academic circles and scholars, in their critical examination of the realities of Iran – Russia relations, present somewhat different views from the political authorities of the two countries regarding the prospects of mutually beneficial relations between them [6; 21, p. 216]. The lack of a unanimous narrative makes it challenging to perceive the current characteristics and prospects of Tehran-Kremlin relations.

This research aimed to explain the perceptions of Iranian politicians and academics regarding the formation of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia, as well as the reasons behind the similarities and differences in these perceptions.

To guide the research, the main question posed by the researcher was, “What are the views of Iranian politicians and academics on the formation of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia?” Additionally, a secondary question was drawn: “What are the reasons that might cause similarities or differences in the views of Iranian politicians and academics regarding

formation of this relationship?” Lastly, the researcher asked, “In what vectors is the debate of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia presented from the perspective of Iranian politicians and academicians?”

Understanding the perceptions of figures related to Iran's domestic and foreign policy toward Russia is theoretically important because the past decade has become a platform for fundamental changes in Russia-West relations [35, p. 424]. This research also has practical importance because understanding the views of influential Iranians in domestic and foreign policy, as well as the academics who educate these officials, can inform our understanding of the relations between the two countries.

On the other hand, the research is relevant for students and scholars of international relations due to the two countries' relatively similar approaches to the multipolar international system and common threats against them. Two countries signed a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on January 17, 2025. The formalization of this partnership in the form of a treaty justifies the relevance of this research.

While the relationship between Iran and Russia is a hot topic among the public, politicians, and researchers in Iran, the “strategic partnership” between the two, despite being vastly discussed in public, has not been adequately explored in Iranian scientific literature except for a few cases with different findings [26, p. 167]. The views and perceptions of individuals related to this

partnership between the two countries have not been systematically investigated.

The lack of adequate sources to understand Iranian politicians' perceptions justifies the scientific community's need for this research.

This research is the first to explore the characteristics of two groups of individuals' perceptions regarding the formation of a strategic partnership between Tehran and the Kremlin.

This research's most significant contribution to existing knowledge is the broad impact of its findings on informing Iranian and foreign policymakers and researchers and providing a foundation for further academic research to better understand the views related to Iran's foreign policy towards Russia and the prospects for cooperation between the two countries.

As the core concept of this research, strategic partnership has been defined through various approaches. A strategic partnership is an institutionalized relationship short of alliance, designed to serve mutual interests through regular consultation, coordination, and cooperation [18, p. 17]. It is a flexible diplomatic tool that allows states to manage complex interdependencies and address global challenges without the binding commitments of formal alliances [25]. A strategic partnership is distinguished by its pragmatic, interest-driven nature and adaptability to changing international environments, often serving to enhance influence, build trust, and pursue shared strategic goals while maintaining autonomy [24, pp. 3-5].

The author believes a strategic partnership is a formalized and enduring relationship between states or organizations characterized by mutual interests, long-term cooperation, and a shared commitment to achieving common objectives across multiple domains, such as politics, security, and economics.

A strategic partnership differs from an alliance. The distinction between them lies in their scope, formality, obligations, and purpose. An alliance is a formal, long-term agreement between states, often codified in treaties, involving mutual defense obligations and shared military-political objectives [39, p. 12]. Examples include NATO or the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, where members are legally bound to collective defense.

It also differs from "strategic cooperation," which is a more flexible, ad hoc arrangement

focused on specific shared interests, such as counterterrorism or economic projects, without binding security guarantees [8, p. 32]. Strategic cooperation enables states to collaborate selectively (e.g., Russia and Iran in Syria) while avoiding permanent alignment, making it less institutionalized and more adaptable to shifting geopolitical dynamics [32, p. 44].

Reviewing the literature. The literature on this research needs to be developed due to the lack of comparative studies that have examined the views of Iranian politicians and academics. Therefore, this research gap led the researcher to introduce those studies that, by addressing various aspects of the relationship between Tehran and the Kremlin, examined these connections in terms of nature and form.

This relationship was brought forward mainly after Iran – Russia cooperation in Syria as scholars scrutinized various forms of relations between Iran and Russia, from strategic alliance [4, p. 181; 13, p. 229; 36, p. 29], strategic convergence [3, p. 115], and strategic pragmatism [28, p. 117] to anti-hegemonic [19, p. 260; 30, p. 77; 33, p. 63].

Mirfakhraei [26, p. 167] conceptualized Iran – Russia relations as a strategic partnership, identifying the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the 2022 conflict in Ukraine as key factors accelerating this relationship. However, while his research emphasized the relatively minor role of economic and geoeconomic factors in this partnership, it primarily focused on the military-defense dimension to support the argument for a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia, which he considered the dominant aspect of their relationship. He previously described the developments in Syria, where he characterized the relations between Iran and Russia as quasi-strategic defensive cooperation, and also in Ukraine as a suitable platform for collaboration between Iran and Russia, which, according to the author, could lead these relations toward a strategic partnership [27, p. 155].

The most significant relationship type between the two countries that has attracted the most attention from researchers is the strategic alliance. This alliance was highlighted under the influence of events in Syria, and the cooperation between Tehran and Moscow to preserve the

Damascus regime raised the question of whether the nature of the collaboration between the two countries is strategic or tactical. In response to this question, Rafiei et al. [36, p. 29] inquired about the reasons behind the cooperation between the two countries in Syria and the prospects for this cooperation. They found that long-term political-economic interests and a common enemy of Iran and Russia in Syria led to operational collaboration between the two countries at the level of a strategic alliance.

On the other hand, their cooperation in Syria raised questions about whether the Iran – Russia alliance could lead to more regional alliances in various areas. In this regard, Ghani and Asgarian critically examined this strategic alliance, stating that the two countries must have more common interests for this alliance to extend strategically to other areas. Therefore, this is not feasible under current conditions, and changes must be made to deepen cooperation [13, p. 229].

Some researchers have noted that this cooperation should be viewed as a form of interest alignment, as it is limited and temporary and is confined to specific areas for collaboration against a non-state threat [4, p. 181].

Alhoei [3, p. 115] said that having relatively common interests cannot maintain this strategic convergence, and cooperation with Russia must be pursued on a broader scale.

In critiquing the strategic nature of the relationship between the two countries, Omid [31, pp. 50-58] stated that limiting factors in Iran – Russia relations make it non-strategic, being viewed as cautious from Russia's side and pragmatic from Iran's side. In response to what form the Iran – Russia relationship could take, other researchers focused on strategic pragmatism, considering it necessary to build coalitions, strategic neutralization, tactical cooperation, and constructional balancing [28, p. 117].

Researchers deemed Iran – Russia cooperation effective in balancing at two macro levels: confronting destabilizing U.S. policies and actions and emphasizing broad regional balancing in adjusting order and ensuring strategic stability [30, p. 77]. The expansion of strategic relations between the two countries through alliance building aims to reduce structural pressures and create balance against the U.S.'s dominant hegemonic system [33, p. 63].

Contrarily, some researchers who have analyzed the various forms of Iran – Russia relations are entirely opposed to any strategic or stable relationship between Tehran and the Kremlin. According to these critics, the strategic partnership between these two countries is perceived as influenced by their temporary cooperation in Syria, with Iran and Russia acting to increase cooperation levels due to a temporary need to protect their interests [1, p. 141]. Therefore, this relationship is an “illusory entente” and cannot be considered a formidable strategic axis [14, p. 164].

However, the most important source on the strategic partnership between the two countries was a collection of contributions from prominent Iranian and Russian researchers [17]. The contributors to this book were mainly divided into two groups: supporters (Sazhin [17, pp. 9-21]; Topychkanov [17, pp. 29-33]; Shoori [17, pp. 59-65]; Evseev [17, pp. 66-72]; Lukyanov [17, pp. 91-95]; Knyazev [17, pp. 102-107]) and skeptics (Karami [17, pp. 22-81]; Kortunov [17, pp. 34-41]; Shariatnia [17, pp. 151-154]) of the possibility of forming a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia. The significant challenges of this source, however, were its predominantly academic narrative, lesser participation of politicians and figures influencing the diplomatic relations between the two countries (with a few exceptions), and its temporal distance from the events of 2022, which lacked the inclusion of new economic and military developments and significant changes in Iran – Russia relations following intensified international sanctions against Moscow.

Methodology, methods, materials. This research's design was exploratory, as it enabled the in-depth examination of a topic that had not been previously studied. It uncovered unexpected themes and generated hypotheses for further investigation. The research philosophy was based on interpretivism epistemology, which was socially constructed [2, p. 41] and intended to understand motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences that are time- and context-bound [29, p. 111] and described and interpreted multiple subjective and context-bound realities [37, p. 54]. The research philosophy was based on an idealistic ontology, emphasizing the understanding of truth through the human mind [16, pp. 699-710] and

socially constructed meaning. The research's reasoning was inductive, moving from specific data to general findings and the establishment of a theory [12, p. 48]. The methodological approach was qualitative and single-method, as it involved a non-mathematical process of interpretation to discover concepts and relationships in the raw data and then organize them into a theoretical explanatory scheme [9, pp. 12-13]. The research strategy employed a case study approach, providing an in-depth, multifaceted explanation of a complex topic within its real-life context [10, p. 2] over a cross-sectional time frame.

The absence of a theoretical framework in this qualitative research can be justified by the study's "inductive" and "exploratory" nature [38, pp. 34-35], which aims to capture participants' lived experiences and meanings without imposing preconceived theoretical constructs. This case study aimed to uncover new phenomena without preconceived assumptions; therefore, the author did not employ a specific theory.

The data collection tool consisted of a semi-structured interview guided by an interview guide or a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The researcher attempted to transform the interview into a guided conversation rather than a traditional question-and-answer session. These questions were:

1. What are the main vectors of Iran – Russia relations?
2. How do you assess the role of each of these vectors in Iran – Russia relations?
3. What is your definition and perception of "strategic partnership"?
4. What is your opinion on the feasibility of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia?
5. What impacts will a strategic partnership have on Iran – Russia relations?
6. What are the strengths of forming a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia?
7. What challenges exist for a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia?

The statistical population of this research included a large number of Iranian politicians and academics. The sampling method was non-probability purposeful so that the most knowledgeable and well-informed samples were selected [15, p. 107].

The selection parameter or inclusion criteria for the research sample were based on the

characteristics of the statistical population, specifically those preoccupied with political or scientific activity related to Russia.

The sample size for this research consisted of 30 individuals, comprising 15 politicians across four categories and three university professors for each of the five academic categories, totaling 15 individuals.

First, four test interviews were conducted to identify weaknesses and increase interview quality. The researcher modified the questions based on feedback from the pilot interviews and then conducted the primary interviews. Interviews were continued until data saturation was achieved, when no new data were obtained from the interviews [23, p. 32]. The interviews were conducted individually and in person from early July to late September 2024, spanning two months in Tehran, Iran. Each interview lasted, on average, 30 to 45 minutes. Responses were recorded using a recorder device and then converted into a digital text file on a computer using Microsoft Office Word 2024 to facilitate their review and analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected and textualized data. The reason for choosing thematic analysis was that, unlike content analysis, the unit of analysis extends beyond a word or term, paying more attention to the context of the data and its subtleties. The researcher developed a comprehensive thematic analysis process in six steps by combining the methods proposed by King et al. [20, pp. 196-217], Braun and Clarke [7, pp. 79-87], and Attride-Stirling [5, pp. 386-395].

First, the researcher became familiar with the interview data by reading and rereading transcripts to identify initial ideas and patterns. Codes were then generated manually, using an inductive approach. This means that codes were not predetermined but emerged directly from the data, allowing the researcher to break down the text into meaningful and analyzable segments. As interviews progressed, the constant comparison method was used to refine and finalize codes, ensuring that similar ideas were grouped and differences were recognized within and between interviews.

This principle guided the search for themes: themes should be specific, distinct, and non-repetitive but also broad enough to capture the

complexity of the data. Themes were identified by grouping related codes together and further refined through the creation of these networks. This step ensured that each theme was both internally consistent (homogeneous) and distinct from others (heterogeneous), as suggested by Patton [34, pp. 393-394].

Finally, the researcher analyzed and interpreted these themes and sub-themes to provide a more abstract explanation of the respondents' perspectives. The findings were presented with illustrative quotes from the data, demonstrating how the themes addressed the research questions and capturing the diversity of respondents' views.

To achieve rigor (analogous to validity and reliability in quantitative studies), the researcher utilized criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba [22, pp. 290-300]. The author actively engaged with participants to enhance "credibility." Member checks involved sharing a summary of interviews with participants, allowing them to validate the researcher's interpretations. Peer review was used to control "confirmability." Experts reviewed and discussed coded data and categories to reach a consensus. The researcher performed an audit trail to ensure "dependability." Maximum variation sampling, considering expertise, experience, and job-related connections, contributes to data credibility and the "transferability" and dependability of findings.

To minimize the likelihood of bias during interviews, the researcher and five other investigators reviewed the questions. The author refrained from imposing his assumptions on participants' responses, ensuring that prior assumptions and ideas do not dictate the nature of the interview. The researcher employed active listening techniques and follow-up questions to investigate interviewees' answers and prevent bias.

Interviews were conducted without recording participants' personal information to ensure anonymity. The researcher provided them with the option to either participate or decline and the freedom to choose not to answer specific questions. The researcher transparently informed interviewees about the research and interview objectives to guarantee informed consent. Audio recordings were made with participants' permission, and when this was not feasible, the researcher took notes. After transcribing the

interviews, the responses were sent to all participants for validation and accuracy.

This research was conducted with 30 Iranian respondents who held clear views on the Iran – Russia relationship and attached importance to various aspects. Initially, to better understand the research context and familiarize the reader with the characteristics of respondents whose perspectives on the strategic partnership between Iran and Russia and its various dimensions were evaluated, descriptive information on the characteristics of these individuals is provided so that the reader can have a clearer picture of the people whose opinions were examined in this research. Accordingly, Table presents demographic descriptions of the interviewees, categorized by occupation and education.

The interviewees' diverse and differing views resulted in the collection of a considerable amount of data. Upon closer examination of the data, two themes emerged from the interviewees' perceptions.

Results. Theme One: Feasibility of Strategic Partnership. Sub-theme One: Feasible and Achieved Strategic Partnership. The first sub-theme includes those who wholly agreed with the idea of forming a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia and spoke of its formation in effect. This perspective, predominant among several diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and politicians from the Ministry of Interior of Iran, emphasized the importance of this partnership. Individuals with this view stated that a strategic partnership with Russia benefits Iran. Those who believed in the formation of this strategic partnership considered examples of political, security, and economic cooperation between the two countries as convincing reasons to support their arguments.

Interviewee no. 14, a private sector merchant who believed that Iran and Russia had entered a strategic partnership for years, paid particular attention to the issue of banking cooperation between Iran and Russia and highlighted that: "Efforts to link the banking systems of the two countries and expand financial relations have been among the most important features of recent economic relations between Iran and Russia, pursued seriously within the framework of the two countries' macro policies

Demographic description of the interviewees according to occupation and education

Code	Occupation	Education
1	Employee of Ministry of Foreign Affairs	PhD
2	Employee of Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Master
3	Employee of Ministry of Foreign Affairs	PhD
4	Employee of Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Master
5	Employee of Ministry of Interior	Master
6	Employee of Ministry of Interior	PhD
7	Employee of Ministry of Interior	Master
8	Employee of Ministry of Interior	Master
9	Employee of Member of Parliament	Master
10	Employee of Member of Parliament	Master
11	Employee of Member of Parliament	PhD
12	Former Member of Parliament	Master
13	Private Sector	PhD
14	Private Sector	Bachelor
15	Private Sector	Master
16	Professor of Political Sciences	PhD
17	Professor of Political Sciences	PhD
18	Professor of Political Sciences	PhD
19	Professor of International Relations	PhD
20	Professor of International Relations	PhD
21	Professor of International Relations	PhD
22	Professor of Regional Studies	PhD
23	Professor of Regional Studies	PhD
24	Professor of Regional Studies	PhD
25	Professor of Political Geography	PhD
26	Professor of Political Geography	PhD
27	Professor of Political Geography	PhD
28	Professor of Economics	PhD
29	Professor of Economics	PhD
30	Professor of Economics	PhD

to circumvent sanctions and reduce the destructive effects of international punishments.”

Sub-theme Two: Feasible but Unachieved Strategic Partnership. While the second sub-theme argued that despite the feasibility of this relationship, it has yet to materialize in practice, its proponents presented significant reasons to support their claim. Despite seeing signs of favorable conditions for forming a strategic partnership, those whose views fell under this sub-theme believed that additional factors and conditions were involved that, in their opinion, had not yet been realized in practice. This combination of sub-themes, which acknowledged the feasibility

of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia, regardless of its actual realization, formed the first theme identified in this research, indicating the potential for creating such a relationship between Tehran and Moscow. A diplomat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interviewee no. 3, stated: “The increased meetings of diplomatic officials from both countries have paved the way for more effective cooperation. However, it cannot signify a strategic partnership between them alone.”

Theme Two: Impossibility of Strategic Partnership. *Sub-theme One: Impossible Strategic Partnership with No Alternatives.* In contrast to the first theme, the thematic analysis

revealed that other interviewed people doubted the feasibility of this relationship between Tehran and the Kremlin. Their views formed another sub-theme that did not consider a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia feasible, nor did they envision alternative forms, such as strategic cooperation or alliance. This sub-theme, mainly observed among academics, particularly highlighted the commercial aspects of a strategic partnership. All of the interviewees who challenged the feasibility of forming a strategic partnership between the two countries considered commercial factors to be the most determining barrier to changing the level of Tehran-Moscow relations. Given the nature of a strategic partnership, which is primarily based on economic and commercial factors, they viewed the low level of mutual trade between the two countries as an area that, unless fundamentally transformed and enhanced, does not create a prospect for achieving a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia.

Interviewee no. 21, who was entirely opposed to the possibility of forming this relationship between the two countries, argued that: “As long as trade relations between the actors do not develop, a strategic partnership cannot be discussed because this concept originates from business studies, and its extension to other areas such as political and military should not overshadow the centrality of trade relations between the parties.”

Sub-theme Two: Impossible Strategic Partnership but with Alternative Forms. Another sub-theme was identified among those who opposed the existence of a strategic partnership between Tehran and Moscow. Although they did not see forming a strategic partnership between the two countries as feasible, they considered other forms of relationship, such as strategic relations or cooperation, between Tehran and Moscow possible. They referred to various types of relations, which they believed described the current relationship between Iran and Russia. These two sub-themes, which opposed the feasibility of a strategic partnership, were identified as part of the theme that questioned the feasibility of such a relationship between Tehran and the Kremlin.

Interviewee no. 30, a professor of economics, highlighted the regional trade cooperation between Iran and Russia and the

establishment of trade institutions: “Although the level of trade between Iran and Russia is lower compared to other top trade partners of the two countries and cannot support a strategic partnership between them, the prospect of increasing trade relations between these two, especially in recent years and particularly after 2022, has transformed, making Iran and Russia strategic relations stronger.”

Discussion. The themes identified in the interviewees’ responses about the Iran – Russia relationship showed that the selected Iranian diplomats and politicians largely believed in forming a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia. They indicated greater alignment among individuals involved in Iran’s domestic and foreign policy dynamics, supporting a strategic partnership between the two countries.

For instance, Interviewee 4 (a diplomat) argued the partnership had already been achieved, citing expanded economic cooperation under sanctions. At the same time, Interviewee 7 pointed to the longstanding security collaboration in regions such as Syria and Central Asia as evidence of an existing strategic alignment. However, other politicians, such as Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 10, believed that while feasible, the partnership remained unrealized due to insufficient institutional frameworks and a lack of political will.

The interviewees from the politicians aligned with Iran’s ruling political system, which has expanded its relations with Russia centered on security and military cooperation for decades and has significantly increased mutual trade in recent years, especially after 2022, supported the formation of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia due to several factors. Among the most critical factors are the role of political interests and the importance of gaining support and maintaining good relations with Russia. Iranian officials expect Russia to act as an ally or supporter of Tehran against military threats.

In contrast, most academics selected for the interview did not view a strategic partnership as feasible, at least in the present. Due to their relative independence from political, security, and economic influences, academics had a relatively more diverse views. They provided a more realistic and evidence-based narrative about the prospects of forming a strategic partnership. Most of this evidence related to the nature of

cooperation between the two countries, while the role of problems facing mutual commodity trade between Iran and Russia was also prominent among the reasons given for opposing the feasibility of forming a strategic partnership between Tehran and Moscow.

Interviewee 18, a political scientist, flatly rejected the partnership concept due to negligible trade volumes, stating, "How can we speak of strategic partnership when mutual trade remains so limited?" Similarly, Interviewee 23 emphasized that the relationship could not qualify as a true partnership without deeper commercial ties. Some academics, like Interviewee 24, acknowledged significant military cooperation in Syria but distinguished this from a comprehensive strategic partnership. The economic focus of these academic critiques was exemplified by Interviewee 29, who argued Russia's "small markets" could not compensate for Iran's lack of access to Western economies.

The divergence between these groups appears rooted in their professional contexts and analytical frameworks. These variations reveal how institutional affiliations and methodological approaches shape perceptions of bilateral relations, with policymakers prioritizing geopolitical realities and academics emphasizing measurable economic indicators. Interviewees' consistent reference to specific cooperation areas (security for politicians, trade for academics) demonstrates how professional backgrounds filter interpretations of the same bilateral relationship.

Conclusion. The study revealed two key themes: one supporting the feasibility of a strategic partnership between Iran and Russia (split between those believing it was already realized and those seeing it as potential but unrealized), and another rejecting its possibility (divided between those denying any strategic partnership and those acknowledging alternative forms of relations). It was also discovered that the most important vectors of ties between the two countries, which were of interest to the interviewees, included political, security, military, economic, commercial, technical, and scientific.

The theoretical importance of this research's findings is better understood when considering the need to comprehend recent political, security, and geopolitical trends between Iran and Russia within the international system, particularly in the context

of sanction policies, the paradigm shift between Russia and the West, and the longstanding conflict between Iran and the West. The findings from the examination of Iranian interviewees' views help inform future policymaking by both Iranian and Russian actors, as well as others, highlighting the practical importance of this research.

The most crucial conclusion the researcher draws from this exploration is that a strategic partnership with Russia is more a result of the limited possibilities facing Iran's political system and, to some extent, Iran's compulsion to move closer to countries like Russia and China due to the necessity of breaking international isolation, political pressure, and economic sanctions imposed on Tehran. It drives the ruling political system to adopt policies that will benefit the country most under current conditions, even if these decisions face criticism from society, academia, and even parts of the government.

Iran and Russia have political interests in forming a strategic partnership to counterbalance Western (mainly U.S.) influence and promote a multipolar world order. For Russia, Iran is a key regional player for maintaining influence in the Middle East, securing its southern borders, and supporting joint security and economic projects. For Iran, partnership with Russia helps break international isolation, provides diplomatic and military support, and opens up opportunities for economic cooperation and regional connectivity.

Despite shared interests, several issues hinder the development of a true strategic partnership. These include an imbalance in power and resources (with Russia being the stronger partner), differing regional priorities (mainly, relations with other regional states), underdeveloped economic ties due to sanctions and bureaucracy, lack of strong institutional mechanisms for cooperation, and mutual mistrust rooted in historical experiences. Additionally, both countries sometimes compete in energy markets, limiting deeper collaboration.

One of the most significant limitations of this research was the lack of access to individuals at high political levels in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior; however, this was not the case with the academicians. The small sample size in in-depth interviews limits the ability to map those qualitative findings to a broader population. The insights may not represent the larger populations, particularly in other locations in Iran.

Methodologically, this research faced limitations related to its single-method qualitative approach, which must be combined with quantitative data to validate its qualitative findings and achieve more robust and generalizable conclusions.

Future research should also examine the views of Russian and Western politicians and academics. Another suggestion is to study the opinions of Iranian merchants and state and non-state economic managers, which would help expand the inclusivity of the research.

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