

Iran, Russia seek to reshape global hegemony

New bilateral agreement sets stage



By Emil Avdaliani
Scholar

OPINION

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian met in Kazan, Russia, during the latest BRICS (a loose political economic grouping originally consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit, held on October 22–24. This follows an earlier meeting between the two leaders on bilateral ties in Ashgabat on October 11. Given that Iran has recently inaugurated a new president who seeks to improve foreign relations, the bilateral agenda was quite expansive, accounting for both countries' interest in developing closer ties in light of their respective conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Both sides have found themselves in a similar position — isolated by the West, targeted by sanctions, and eager for new allies — and look to establish closer political and military cooperation. Moscow and Tehran are motivated to introduce an agreement that would reflect their changing preferences and underline their shared opposition to the collective West.

Cooperation between the two countries has seen incremental improvement across various fronts since 2022. This trend is expected to culminate in the signing of a comprehensive agreement that promises to redefine the scope of their strategic partnership. Although an exact date for such a signing has not yet been established, both Moscow and Tehran will likely look to ratify some sort of treaty by the end of the year, as both sides are eager to quickly sign an agreement, demonstrated by their ambitious designs in bilateral ties.

While Iran and Russia have been historical adversaries more often than not — having vied for influence in the Caucasus and Middle East throughout the imperial era — their cooperation does have historical roots. In the late 16th century, Safavid Iran and the Russian Tsardom joined forces to counter Ottoman expansion. Similarly, in today's context, Russia and Iran's warming relationship is driven by shared grievances against the West and their common desire to challenge the world order. Tehran's support for backed regimes throughout the Middle East and



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (l) and Russian President Vladimir Putin extend hands to shake during their meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 23, 2024.
● MAXIM SHEMETOV/AP

The exact contents of what would be in this agreement are unknown. Compared with a previous treaty signed by the two countries more than 20 years ago, the expected agreements will likely involve much more extensive political, economic, and cultural ties. A heavy emphasis will likely be placed on military and security cooperation as this is the cornerstone of their expanding relationship. More precisely, drone and missile production is sure to top Moscow and Tehran's agendas, given that their respective conflicts with Ukraine and Israel have proven to both the importance of such weapon systems. The two sides are also likely to double down on greater training assistance and Iran's purchase of Russian Su-35 fighter jets and potentially S-400 missile systems. Outside of defense, the new agreement is also set to extend collaboration into areas such as trade, media, education, space exploration, cultural exchange, and a common payment system. Moscow and Tehran will also be eager to resolve disagreements impeding the construction of major gas pipelines in Iran, implementing liquefied natural gas projects, and undertaking swap operations involving natural gas and oil products.

Infrastructure will be a critical topic of discussion. Moscow and Tehran have tried to improve and expand the vital International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Running along the Caspian Sea, connecting Russia with Iran's southern ports, and creating access to the Indian Ocean and South Asian markets, this corridor has been a historic trading route between Russia and Iran since the 16th century, used by both to bypass Ottoman influence and access distant markets across the region.

Moscow's support for the Syrian regime have both been viewed as examples of their efforts to counter Western influence in the region.

For Iran, Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and its subsequent isolation from Western diplomatic institutions acted as a defining moment that pushed Russia into closer relations with the Islamic Republic. Isolated from Western trade and facing heavy sanctions, Russia's pivot to the Middle East and Asia has made Iran an indispensable partner. Iran has supported Russia with advanced weaponry, and these budding ties even extended to proxy conflicts, such as Moscow's alleged support for the Houthis in Yemen, even at the risk of damaging Russia's relationships with other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have traditionally opposed the Houthis.

Moscow's shift to a more pro-Iran stance has become much more pronounced in recent years. Even so, direct military support in Iran's conflicts, particularly with Israel — which harbors a large Russian population — remains unlikely. Nevertheless, leaders in Iran and Russia envision a multipolar world premised on challenging Western geopolitical and economic hegemony. This fits into a more comprehensive continuum of countries, China being the principal actor, looking to create alternative alliance networks and key geopolitical leaders globally. The rise of transnational organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization marks a new era in global geopolitics, with Russia and Iran positioning themselves as ascending powers.

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BRICS summit boost to India-Iran ties



By Rajeev Agarwal
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OPINION

At the 16th BRICS Summit hosted by Russia in Kazan (October 22–24, 2024), there were a few meetings on the sidelines which created a buzz. One such meeting was between India and Iran, both close civilisational friends and looking to strengthen a stagnating partnership. Iran, which is now embroiled in the war in Gaza, is looking for Indian support in de-escalating the crisis. India, too, has supported having a cease-fire and de-escalation at the earliest. Globally, India is being widely sought after to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict as it enjoys trust and goodwill across both ends of the conflict, with Israel and Iran.



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (l) meets with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 22, 2024.
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Much potential

The bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Masoud Pezeshkian was the first time that the leaders have met. During the meeting, they acknowledged the strong and untapped potential in the bilateral relationship. Mr. Pezeshkian appreciated India's growing role in the world and underlined its potential role in de-escalating the Gaza conflict. He also acknowledged the key role played by India in 2023 in Iran's entry into key multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS. Both sides also discussed the possibilities of strengthening cooperation in key areas such as the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Iran's importance for India, however, goes well beyond the Chabahar Port and the connectivity options that it provides. Iran is vitally important due to its vast reserves of crude oil and natural gas. Its total oil reserves are estimated at 209 billion barrels and that of natural gas at 33,988 billion cubic metres, which at the end of 2021, accounted for 24% of the oil reserves of West Asia and 12% of the world. Despite crippling economic sanctions and the ongoing war in Gaza, Iran's crude production in May 2024 rose to 3.4 million barrels per day (bpd) while crude oil exports in March 2024 averaged 1.61 million bpd.

Options for closer partnership

The Chabahar Port has been the driving force of the bilateral relationship in recent times. In a deal signed on May 13 this year, India and Iran signed a 10-year contract for the operation of the port. Chabahar Port also provides easy and short access to India's Kandla and Mumbai ports. As it is located outside the Strait of Hormuz, it insulates India's trade from any threat of closure of sea lanes due to conflicts in the Persian Gulf region. In addition, a

railway link of 700 km between Chabahar and Zahedan city is being fast-tracked, to be connected later to the railway network of Iran. A further road link from Zahedan to Zaranj in Afghanistan could provide seamless connectivity for humanitarian aid from India to Afghanistan.

Energy supplies are the next big possibility. Before May 2019, Iran met almost 12% of India's crude oil needs. As bilateral ties take better shape, oil and gas imports could re-commence from Iran which could then open up a new range of possibilities to fulfil India's energy needs.

To combat the threat of terror groups operating from Pakistan, India and Iran could conduct joint counterterrorism exercises and develop intelligence-sharing mechanisms. On the naval front, port calls at Iranian ports and the development of logistical facilities in the Persian Gulf could prove extremely useful.

Aspects of Indian diplomacy

India and Iran can achieve a lot together. There is recognition that too much time has already been lost. India's ability to de-hyphenate ties and engage inde-



The first consignment of Indian equipment for the development of port activities at Iran's Chabahar Port
● TINN

The ambitious Iran-Oman-India gas pipeline has been under discussion since 1993. In May 2022, Iran and Oman agreed to develop two undersea gas pipelines and an oil field along their maritime borders. If this materialises, extending these to India could be an option.

Close military cooperation with Iran is also a possibility. The two countries had signed a defence cooperation agreement in 2001 but nothing came of it, mainly due to Western sanctions on Iran. In recent years, Iran has developed modern weapons platforms such as short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, hypersonic missiles, and armed drones. India too is looking to develop cheap and effective armed drones and could find an effective partner in Iran.

pendently with nations that are adversarial to each other, such as Iran and Israel, could be useful in driving the ties. Also, India's decision to exercise strategic autonomy in issues of national interest, as seen in its engagement with Russia during the Ukraine war, is a useful precedent to invigorate ties with Iran.

India, under Modi 3.0, is looking to strengthen India's outreach and strategic convergence in West Asia. Similarly, Iran is looking to consolidate its diplomatic gains of recent years and considers India to be an important partner. The meeting at the BRICS Summit may have just given the right impetus for both.

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