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An Analysis of Iran–Russia Relations during the Second Pahlavi Era and the Islamic Republic from the Perspective of National Interests

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ABSTRACT

Foreign policy consists of the set of positions, actions, and decisions adopted by national governments toward one another or toward international organizations, the primary objective of which is the realization of the national interest of the state as an integrated political unit. In the process of foreign policy decision-making, decision-makers must articulate their general perceptions of national interests in the form of concrete objectives and policies; assess their available capabilities and resources for the implementation of such objectives; determine the appropriate methods for employing those capabilities in pursuit of the intended goals; and, in practice, act toward the attainment of foreign policy objectives. Securing national interests constitutes the principal objective of foreign policy decision-making. The definition and identification of national interests is a difficult and complex matter and may be approached from multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, certain core elements may be emphasized, including the preservation of independence and territorial integrity, the maintenance of national prestige, the security of borders, and the continuation of peace and avoidance of war. The research method of this study is descriptive–comparative. The data collection method is documentary (library-based), involving the examination and analysis of existing books and scholarly articles relevant to the subject of the research. Recent developments indicate an increasing strategic convergence between Iran and Russia. Among these developments are the conclusion of a long-term cooperation agreement between the two states, the strengthening of defense and armaments cooperation, the expansion of economic exchanges outside the framework of the US dollar, and even reports of intelligence and military cooperation in cases such as the Ukraine war. Collectively, these developments demonstrate that the actual conduct of this policy can be analyzed on the basis of realist theoretical models, particularly with respect to the pursuit of national interests, the countering of perceived threats, and the enhancement of relative power.

Keywords: Consequences; Russia; Second Pahlavi; Islamic Republic

Introduction

Iran and Russia are two empires with long historical trajectories. Iran embodies some of the world's most ancient civilizations, while Russia emerged as an empire from the sixteenth century onward. With the rise of the Safavid dynasty in Iran and the Romanov dynasty in Russia, the region witnessed profound transformations. Both states came to be recognized as influential powers in regional and global politics (1). Owing not only to geographical proximity, historical experience, and economic necessities, but also to the distinctive positions each country



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occupies in international politics, Iran–Russia relations have attracted sustained attention from international circles. Multiple factors—including vast natural resources such as oil and gas, human capital, military capabilities, regional influence, and the role of the United States and Western powers—have collectively endowed Tehran–Moscow relations with special strategic importance (2, 3). Relations between Iran and Russia have consistently remained a subject of concern at three levels: the domestic level among Iranian and Russian elites, the regional level, and the international level (4). At the level of Russian foreign policy decision-making toward Iran, relations have experienced considerable fluctuation, creating substantial analytical challenges in understanding their underlying nature. This ambiguity in Russian foreign policy behavior has persisted for more than a century (5).

During the Second World War, Britain and the Soviet Union approached Iran through two distinct strategic calculations. They initially accepted Iran's neutrality; however, following the transformation of wartime dynamics and Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, the occupation of Iran and the strengthening of Soviet military fronts were adopted as instrumental strategies, justified by the alleged presence of German nationals in Iran. On 16 September 1941, British and Soviet forces advanced toward Tehran from two directions, the Iranian army collapsed, and the Shah was compelled to abdicate. From this point onward, a new phase of Iran–Soviet relations commenced, during which effective control of many state affairs fell into Soviet hands. After the signing of the Tripartite Treaty among Iran, the Soviet Union, and Britain on 30 January 1942, the Allied governments pledged to evacuate Iran within six months. Iran–Soviet relations deteriorated in 1944 following Moscow's demand for oil concessions in northern Iran (6). In 1945, the Soviet Union's refusal to withdraw its forces further intensified tensions and plunged relations into crisis. After Ahmad Qavam assumed office, he managed—through diplomatic maneuvering—to neutralize Soviet pressures and restore a degree of normalization. Under the agreement of 5 April 1946, known as the Qavam–Sadchikov Accord, northern oil concessions were conditionally offered to the Soviets in exchange for troop withdrawal, while border disputes were also addressed, subject to parliamentary ratification. The Fifteenth Majles ultimately rejected the agreement, and with the suppression of autonomous movements in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, the crisis subsided. Subsequently, relations again entered a severe phase, as the Soviet Union drastically reduced commercial activities in Iran, suspended the Baku–Anzali shipping line, dismantled sections of northern fisheries infrastructure, and launched extensive anti-Iranian propaganda. Iran formally rejected the accusations on 4 February 1948, closed Soviet cultural institutions in Tehran, and bilateral trade fell to zero while border tensions escalated (6).

In 1949, following the assassination attempt on the Shah, suspicion was directed toward the Soviet Union and the Tudeh Party, which was subsequently outlawed. Under Prime Minister Razmara, Iranian soldiers captured during Soviet attacks on border posts in Gorgan and Azerbaijan were released, and a joint border commission was established to resolve disputes. As a result, bilateral relations improved and economic exchanges resumed, ending a prolonged crisis. During the administration of Mohammad Mossadegh, whose doctrine of negative equilibrium sought to eliminate both Soviet and British influence through the nationalization of the oil industry, Iran successfully curtailed foreign domination of its petroleum sector. In the final months of Mossadegh's government, Iran–Soviet relations became somewhat more conciliatory, and after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leadership demonstrated renewed interest in expanding relations with Iran (1).

The present study, guided by these historical objectives, seeks to move beyond descriptive narration and to analyze the consequences of Iran–Russia relations during the Second Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic for Iran's national interests.

Consequences of Iran–Russia Relations during the Second Pahlavi Era

Reza Khan was appointed Minister of War on 4 May 1921 and displayed decisiveness and efficiency in restoring security and stability, which had been severely undermined by the First World War, the decline of the Qajar dynasty, the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution, governmental incapacity, and fiscal weakness of provincial authorities. In 1923, Ahmad Shah appointed Reza Khan as Prime Minister and departed for Europe. Inspired by the transformation of the Ottoman monarchy into a republic, Iranian military officers promoted republicanism under Reza Khan's leadership, and a republican proposal was submitted to parliament. However, mass demonstrations led by religious authorities forced the abandonment of the republican plan. Ahmad Shah attempted to dismiss Reza Khan, but under military pressure he was reinstated.

In 1925, amid bread shortages and public unrest, Reza Khan orchestrated the dissolution of the Qajar dynasty. On 31 October 1925, the Majles formally declared the end of Qajar rule. The Assembly of Experts convened for constitutional revision and on 12 December 1925 amended the constitution, transferring sovereignty to Reza Khan and his male descendants (6).

With the support of modernist elites, Reza Shah launched sweeping reforms across the military, administration, and fiscal structures, preparing the state for infrastructural modernization. Roads, railways, and modern educational institutions—including Tehran University—were established, and students were sent abroad for advanced studies. Industrialization initiatives relied heavily on foreign expertise, particularly German specialists. However, disregard for social and cultural conditions generated widespread dissatisfaction, undermining many reform objectives (7, 8). In 1927, Reza Shah abolished the capitulatory system.

The judicial system was reconstructed along European models, and an authoritarian modernization project reshaped Iranian society through state direction, military enforcement, and centralized economic control. Although visible transformation occurred, the absence of popular participation, cultural sensitivity, and scholarly planning deepened public alienation from the regime. The rapidly empowered police apparatus monitored virtually all aspects of urban life, rendering private existence subject to constant surveillance. Life under police oversight became a defining feature of the Reza Shah era (9).

Consequences of Iran–Russia Relations during the Islamic Republic Era

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the major world powers possessed limited knowledge regarding the characteristics, nature, objectives, and operational forces of the new political order. Consequently, they initially perceived the Islamic Revolution as a popular uprising against a corrupt and dependent regime, assuming that with the fall of the monarchy all matters would quickly stabilize and normal conditions would return. However, the broader repercussions of the Revolution—namely the expansion of Islamic political culture and the emergence of political Islam as a new power—constituted an unprecedented phenomenon that gradually reshaped the cultural and political geography of the region and, to some extent, the international system (10).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the communist empire during the final decade of the twentieth century constituted one of the most significant global events of the century—an occurrence whose scope and magnitude had not been anticipated (5). The historical trajectory of Iran–Russia relations has consistently been marked by profound fluctuations. The legacy of humiliating treaties during the Qajar era and Russia's support for Iranian leftist movements in more recent history generated enduring distrust, thereby narrowing the strategic horizon

of policymakers toward political rather than comprehensive engagement (11). The Islamic Republic of Iran gradually concluded that the policy of prioritizing relations with the West in the years following the Iran–Iraq War had failed to satisfy its political, economic, and strategic requirements. Accordingly, balancing and diversifying relations with alternative centers of global power—particularly in the East—emerged as a strategic necessity (12).

Based on Soviet publications, the leadership in Moscow was initially slow in recognizing the signs and consequences of the Iranian Revolution. Soviet newspapers neither reflected the protests in Qom in 1978 nor provided substantial coverage of the February uprising in Tabriz. Even following the massive demonstrations of June and July and the violent events of “Black Friday” in Jaleh Square, Soviet media maintained a policy of silence. By November 1978, Soviet leaders openly regarded the collapse of the Shah’s regime as inevitable. Soviet analysts subsequently portrayed the Shah’s modernization program as mere deception, attributing the crisis to his uncritical alignment with Washington, personal corruption, and political repression. They depicted his regime as sustained by the iron grip of SAVAK and American support, and framed popular resistance not against modernization itself but against American imperialism and authoritarian monarchy (1). Although the Soviet Union played no direct role in inciting the Iranian Revolution, its satisfaction with the Shah’s departure was unsurprising, and Moscow encouraged the new revolutionary regime to pursue anti-American policies.

During 1979–1980, Soviet propaganda frequently called for unity and cooperation among the various revolutionary forces. Soviet analysts viewed the Revolution as a spontaneous popular movement in which the clergy, owing to its unique position, had succeeded in channeling mass pressures and emotions. In this context, the Tudeh Party was perceived as capable only of supporting the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and safeguarding the anti-imperialist achievements of the Revolution—a stance that the Soviet Union actively endorsed. After the dissolution of the Tudeh Party in 1983, party leaders admitted during their trials that their support for the Islamic Republic had been tactical, aimed at infiltrating Iran’s military and security institutions and ultimately seizing power with foreign backing (1).

Military conditions and Soviet behavior during the 1980–1987 period indicated that Moscow failed to exploit strategic opportunities beyond preventing the return of the United States to Iran. When Saddam Hussein sought regional dominance, the Soviet Union faced a strategic dilemma: either support Iraq and abandon the Islamic Republic, or condemn the Iraqi invasion, assist Iran militarily, and hope for the emergence of a new political order in Iraq. Moscow initially called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, recognized the legitimacy of existing borders, and urged Iraqi withdrawal from Iranian territory. However, following Iran’s battlefield successes in 1982, Soviet military assistance to Iraq resumed, reinforcing Baghdad’s capacity to resist Iranian advances. This shift, combined with other developments, prompted the Iranian government to intensify actions against the Tudeh Party. In February 1983, the party’s leader, Nureddin Kianouri, was arrested, and eighteen Soviet diplomats were expelled from Iran. The Soviet Union protested these measures and reassessed the strategic implications of revolutionary Islam in global ideological competition (1).

A further transformation in Soviet policy toward Iran emerged during Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership from 1985 to 1988, marked by Moscow’s increased emphasis on the role of the United Nations—particularly the Secretary-General—in terminating the conflict. The Soviet shift toward multilateral diplomacy coincided with expanding US military commitments in the Persian Gulf. Moscow actively promoted the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 598 and supported the deployment of UN naval escorts to protect shipping in the Gulf, seeking to limit Washington’s

political gains among Gulf Arab states. Simultaneously, the Soviet refusal to endorse sanctions against Iran rendered political pressure ineffective (1).

Consequences of Iran–Russia Relations for National Interests

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the government of the Second Pahlavi era with Russia, each shaped by its own distinct historical and political context, have produced both positive and negative consequences for various dimensions of Iran's national interests. In this regard, analyzing the geopolitical, economic, and military consequences of these relations—particularly in connection with national security, political independence, and the country's international standing—is essential in order to clarify the extent to which these interactions have contributed to the protection or the erosion of Iran's national interests.

During the Second Pahlavi era, Iran's relations with the Soviet Union, defined within the bipolar world order and under the shadow of ideological threats from the Eastern bloc, generated largely limited and dual outcomes for Iran's national interests. On the one hand, Iran's cautious rapprochement with the Soviet Union during certain periods, including cooperation in the construction of the Isfahan steel complex, contributed to industrial development and diversification of foreign relations. Projects such as the Garmsar–Incheh Borun railway line and other industrial infrastructures were also implemented within the framework of economic cooperation with the Soviet Union, reinforcing the foundations of development (13). On the other hand, much of this cooperation was accompanied by deep political mistrust, and economic relations never evolved into a strategic alliance, instead functioning primarily as a bargaining instrument vis-à-vis the West.

In the geopolitical domain, the persistent Soviet threat—particularly during the 1940s and 1950s—compelled Iran to join Western security arrangements such as the Baghdad Pact and CENTO. Although this strategic alignment with the West ostensibly strengthened Iran's security against the Soviet Union, it simultaneously constrained Iran's strategic autonomy and effectively positioned the country as a component of the Western bloc during the Cold War (14). Furthermore, Soviet support for separatist movements in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, along with the activities of the Tudeh Party as an instrument of Soviet influence in Iran's domestic politics, constituted direct threats to Iran's stability and territorial integrity (15).

From a military perspective, Iran–Soviet relations during the Second Pahlavi era remained at their lowest level. Iran preferred to procure its military equipment from the United States and its Western allies, viewing any form of military cooperation with the Soviet Union as a potential threat to its security architecture. Consequently, although diplomatic relations with Moscow were maintained, cooperation—particularly in the military sphere—remained largely inoperative. The outcome of this strategy was profound dependence on the West in security affairs and a weakened bargaining position vis-à-vis both global blocs (16).

In terms of international standing, cautious engagement with the Soviet Union was perceived by some states as evidence of Iran's relative independence in foreign policy, especially during periods when Iran resisted fully subordinating its diplomacy to the United States. However, Iran's deep integration into the Western bloc and overt dependence on Washington during the 1970s substantially undermined its image as an independent international actor, leading many governments to view Iran primarily as an instrument of American regional policy (17).

During the Islamic Republic era, relations with Russia entered a new and considerably more complex phase. Following Iran's withdrawal from alignment with the West and the adoption of the "Neither East, Nor West" doctrine, it was initially assumed that Iran was pursuing full strategic independence. Nevertheless, international sanctions,

regional security threats, and growing global isolation—particularly during the 2000s and 2010s—gradually pushed Iran toward closer cooperation with Russia (18). The result of this cooperation was the strengthening of Iran's strategic position in confronting challenges such as the nuclear issue, the Syrian conflict, and resistance to American influence in the Middle East.

In the geopolitical sphere, Russia played a significant role in enhancing Iran's regional position. Russian support for Iran's military presence in Syria, security coordination in counter-terrorism operations against ISIS, and the use of Iranian air bases by Russian forces for regional operations all reflected tactical convergence between the two states (19). These developments enabled Iran to play a more active role in regional power dynamics and prevented the emergence of a unipolar Middle Eastern order. At the same time, excessive dependence on Russian backing in certain crises—including nuclear negotiations and Security Council affairs—has exposed Iran to strategic vulnerability.

Economically, Iran sought to utilize Russian capacity to mitigate Western sanctions. Economic agreements, cooperation in the energy sector, and Iran's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union were among the apparent achievements aimed at strengthening Iran's economy (20). In practice, however, Russia has never become Iran's primary economic partner, and bilateral trade has largely remained limited in scale. Russia has consistently subordinated its economic relations with Iran to its broader relations with the West and, in some cases, delays in delivering systems such as the S-300 missile platform or retreats from energy contracts have generated domestic dissatisfaction in Iran (21).

In the military domain, unlike during the Pahlavi era, the Islamic Republic managed to establish moderate levels of cooperation with Russia. Arms purchases, military training, and intelligence exchanges constituted important areas of collaboration. Nevertheless, Russia's lack of transparency in demonstrating strategic loyalty to Iran has prevented military relations from reaching a truly strategic level. Iran has consistently remained concerned that Russia may sacrifice Iranian interests in favor of bargaining with the West—a concern rooted in repeated historical experiences of mistrust (21).

With regard to national security, despite certain tactical benefits, Iran–Russia relations during the Islamic Republic era have failed to eliminate the fundamental threats confronting Iran's security. Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its preference for maintaining equilibrium between Iran and its regional rivals, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and has avoided becoming Iran's full strategic ally. While this posture preserves Iran's tactical autonomy, it has constrained the consolidation of Iran's long-term security position on the global stage (7).

Finally, Iran's international standing under the Islamic Republic has, to some extent, been enhanced through selective and temporary cooperation with Russia, particularly in forming short-term coalitions opposing the United States. Simultaneously, Iran's alignment with Russia in controversial international cases—such as the Syrian conflict—has reinforced perceptions among some states that Iran's foreign policy is increasingly aligned with the Eastern bloc. This situation stands in partial tension with the principle of “political independence” emphasized in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (22).

In conclusion, Iran–Russia relations in both the Second Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic period have generated a complex combination of achievements and risks. While under the Second Pahlavi regime these relations remained largely cautious and limited—producing minimal contributions to economic development or national security consolidation—during the Islamic Republic era they evolved into tactical cooperation on strategic matters, yet remained constrained by persistent mistrust and conflicting national interests. In both periods, the

dominant factor shaping outcomes has been the realist logic of power in the international system and the perception of Iran's political elite regarding the country's position within the global order.

Conclusion

Foreign policy consists of the set of positions, actions, and decisions adopted by national governments toward one another or toward international organizations, the primary objective of which is to secure the national interest of the state as an integrated political unit. The Islamic Republic of Iran and, prior to it, the government of the Second Pahlavi era emerged within distinct historical and ideological contexts; nevertheless, both, in confronting global powers—particularly their northern neighbor, the Soviet Union and subsequently the Russian Federation—have displayed patterns of external behavior that merit careful analysis. Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia, and earlier between Iran and the Soviet Union, have consistently constituted a central dimension of Iran's foreign policy. Iran's geopolitical position adjacent to Russia, the historically tense and at times interventionist role of the Soviet Union in Iran's internal affairs, and Iran's strategic significance within the regional and global order have rendered Tehran's relations with this major neighboring power a clear reflection of realist patterns in foreign policy behavior.

Within the international system, realism—one of the oldest and most widely applied theories of international relations—emphasizes the centrality of power, national interest, and survival in an inherently anarchic environment. The theory rests on the assumption that states are the principal actors in international politics, that the international environment lacks a central authority, and that each state must pursue power accumulation and threat balancing to ensure its survival. From this perspective, foreign policy is shaped not by ideology but by imperatives arising from the structure of international power. Consequently, analyzing Iran's relations with the Soviet Union and Russia through this theoretical framework provides a valuable opportunity to assess Iran's foreign policy conduct across two fundamentally different political systems.

During the Second Pahlavi era, Iran operated within the bipolar structure of the Cold War and was compelled to engage with both global superpowers. The Soviet Union maintained a direct and historically significant presence along Iran's northern frontier, including the occupation of Iran during the Second World War, support for separatist movements in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in the mid-1940s, and persistent rivalry with the United States for influence in the Middle East. Mohammad Reza Shah, who consolidated greater authority over foreign policy after the 1953 coup, sought to adopt a realist strategy grounded in balance: preserving a strategic partnership with the West while sustaining cautious cooperation with the Soviet Union.

Available evidence indicates that during the 1960s and 1970s the Shah attempted to exploit East–West rivalries to enhance Iran's strategic position. Economic projects with the Soviet Union—such as the construction of the Isfahan steel complex and the Gorgan–Incheh Borun railway—although embedded within the Shah's broader Western-oriented ideology, reflected a tactical utilization of Eastern bloc resources to strengthen Iran domestically and regionally. Throughout this period, Iran's foreign policy evolved under persistent Soviet-related threats, including the legacy of wartime occupation, Soviet support for separatist movements, and the expansion of communism. The Pahlavi government, by pursuing a realist approach, sought to maintain limited economic engagement with the Soviet Union while constructing a calculated balance between the two Cold War superpowers.

In contrast, following the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic's ideological doctrine of "Neither East, nor West" initially produced confrontation with both global power blocs. Over time, however—particularly after the end of the

Iran–Iraq War and the collapse of the Soviet Union—Iran confronted mounting pressures arising from United States unilateralism, extensive economic sanctions, and regional insecurity, which necessitated a strategic reorientation in foreign policy. Within this context, tactical and strategic rapprochement with Russia in areas such as energy, nuclear technology, arms procurement, and regional cooperation, including the Syrian crisis, emerged as an instrument for balancing Western threats.

Recent developments have further revealed signs of strategic convergence between Iran and Russia. The conclusion of long-term cooperation agreements, expansion of defense and armaments collaboration, growth of non-dollar economic exchanges, and reports of intelligence and military coordination in arenas such as the Ukraine conflict collectively demonstrate that actual policy behavior can be interpreted through realist logic, particularly in terms of securing national interests, countering threats, and enhancing relative power.

At the same time, Iran's relations with the Soviet Union and Russia have consistently been characterized by mutual distrust. The traumatic experience of Iran's occupation during the Second World War, Soviet support for separatism, Russia's delays in delivering advanced defense systems, insufficient backing during critical moments in international forums, and similar episodes have caused segments of Iran's political elite and public opinion to approach relations with Russia cautiously. This dynamic illustrates that even when Iran and Russia share overlapping interests in countering Western pressure, their partnership remains predominantly tactical and situational, rarely achieving the depth and durability of a long-term strategic alliance.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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