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**The Perception of U.S. Threat and its Impact on Russia-Iran Alliance, 2002-2023**

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## Confirmation

I confirm that I am the author of submitted [MA Seminar](#) which has been prepared independently and has never been presented for any other course or used in another educational institution, neither in Lithuania, or abroad. I also provide a full bibliographical list which indicates all the sources that were used to prepare this assignment and contains no un-used sources.

Name, Surname Peyman Amiri

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Peyman Amiri', written on a light-colored background.

## **Introduction**

The history of the Russia-Iran alliance has witnessed numerous twists and turns after the fall of communism. With the domination of pro-western political elites under President Boris Yeltsin in Russia after the USSR dissolution, the Moscow-Tehran alliance was subjected to developing relations between Moscow and Washington D.C. The special attention that Moscow paid to its dialogue with Washington made the authorities in Kremlin to use Iran as a leverage in their political games with the United States, which the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995 is the best example as such (Kozhanov, 2015, P.5).

Vladimir Putin's rise to power as the new president of Russia in 2000, paved the way for increased military cooperation between Iran and Russia; however, the decision taken by Moscow to bandwagon with the West on imposing sanctions on Iran after the disclosure of Iran's nuclear program, on one hand, and the re-construction of relations between Moscow and Washington D.C., on the other hand, provided little room for Iran and Russia to enhance their relations. The above-mentioned situation changed after the re-election of Putin as president in 2012, and Hassan Rouhani's coming to power in August 2013; the break-out of tensions between Moscow and Washington D.C. as a result of 2014 Ukraine crisis and subsequent economic sanctions imposed by the European Union (EU) on the Kremlin, draw Moscow to strengthen cooperation with Tehran (Kozhanov, 2015, pp. 9-10).

In fact, the common threat of sanctions added a justified reason for Russia to deepen its economic ties with Iran. The sanctions put both Moscow and Tehran in the same boat moving towards a same destination. Following that, The Iranian ambassador to Moscow, called the unjust sanctions on Russia and U.S. unilateral policies as a common threat to both which encourages them to cooperate more closely and formulate joint measures regarding their foreign policies (Sanaei, M., 2017).

In the light of harsh international sanctions imposed on Russia, President Hassan Rouhani's détente foreign policy regarding the growing disputes with the United States and international community concerns vis-à-vis its nuclear programs, created a motivation for Russia to develop closer ties with Iran. Moscow was deeply concerned with the Iranian-Western rapprochement in political and security aspects. This is best demonstrated in a recent leaked audiotape by Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in which he said Russia did not want the nuclear deal to succeed and "put all its weight" behind creating obstacles because it

was not in Moscow's interests for Iran to normalize relations with the West and in particular, the United States. (Fassihi, F., 2021). This incident clearly indicates how Russia-Iran relations has been affected by the U.S. factor.

2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine also marked another turning point in the Russia-Iran alliance. Iran's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine was supportive and contributed to the perceived threat of NATO expansion felt by the Russian side. The Iranian Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, in a live televised speech on March 1, 2022, accused the U.S. policies which led to the war in Ukraine. He explained that "The root cause of the Ukraine crisis is the US and western policies".<sup>1</sup> Tehran, which is under political, economic, and military sanctions and an unknown future for its ongoing talks in Vienna over the fate of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the U.S. and P4+1 (the UK, France, Russia, China and Germany), had a motivation to establish closer relations with Russia. Iran considered the NATO expansion as the cause of war in Ukraine. Ebrahim Raisi, Iranian president, in a phone conversation with Vladimir Putin said; 'The expansion of the NATO is a serious threat to the stability and security of independent countries in different regions.'<sup>2</sup>

At the global level, both Iran and Russia tend to reject the NATO expansion. NATO perceptions of threat from Iranian side has recently been expressed in a meeting between Iranian supreme leader and Kazakh President, "the developments should be carefully monitored and looked into due to the fact that the Americans and Westerners are always trying to expand their influence in different regions, no matter whether it is the eastern Asia or western Asia, and to target the independence and sovereignty of other countries".<sup>3</sup> According to Iran and Russia, the expansion of NATO poses threats to their security.

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<sup>1</sup> Hafezi, P. (2022, March 1). Iran's supreme leader criticises U.S. over Ukraine crisis. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-supreme-leader-says-ukraine-is-victim-crises-caused-by-us-2022-03-01/>.

<sup>2</sup> Reuters. (2022, February 24). Iranian president tells Putin that NATO's expansion is 'serious threat' to region's security and stability. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/iranian-president-tells-putin-that-natos-expansion-is-serious-threat-regions-2022-02-24/>.

<sup>3</sup> IRNA. (2022, June 19). Supreme Leader: West plans for NATO expansion main issue in Ukraine crisis. IRNA English; IRNA English. <https://en.irna.ir/news/84794181/Supreme-Leader-West-plans-for-NATO-expansion-main-issue-in-Ukraine>.

Despite researches and analysis carried out by academics and institutions on the Iranian-Russia relations, it is still crucial to investigate the topic much more in-depth and provide a rather comprehensive answer. Tehran-Moscow alliance and the role of the U.S. factor is a widespread topic due to the two countries (Iran and Russia) ongoing confrontation with Washington D.C. Therefore, selected topic intends to provide a new perspective regarding the case. Although other factors affect the Russia-Iran alliance, yet for the purpose of this thesis, I will mainly focus **on the role of U.S. factor and common threats** shaping the relation between two countries.

The opportunity to gather and utilize Persian sources is a great advantage in giving the case study a much broader outlook. The timeline of study is chosen from 2002 till 2023. There has been several decisive changes in Russian-Iranian relationships in the time period which will apply to this research. What makes the present thesis distinctive is shedding light on a new turning-point between Russia-Iran alliance which is 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although research has been done on the topic, none of them, has yet addressed the recent tectonic Russian Invasion of Ukraine changing the international politics. **This thesis is designed to fill this gap in academic literature.**

Given the complexity of the issue, the thesis aims to answer several key research questions. The main leading question is following; How and why the U.S. perception of threat impacted Russia-Iran alliance between 2002-2023? This question and subsequent answer will provide the backbone of present thesis structure.

In order to answer this question, several sub-questions must also be addressed. These sub-questions are as following;

- How the normalization of relations between Iran and the West, the United States, impacted Russia and Iran alliance?
- What factor can best explain Iran's stance on 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine?

#### **The tasks of the thesis**

- 1. To discuss how the U.S factor has been influential in shaping Russia-Iran relations**
- 2. To identify common threats perceived by Russia and Iran**
- 3. To determine the turning points in Russia-Iran relations**

## **Literature assessment**

The following literature review covers scholarly articles, journals and political analyses related to the topic. The literatures which will be shortly touched upon, has been gathered based on the criteria of U.S. factor impact in Russia-Iran relations.

Ali Fathollah-Nejad, in *Iran in an Emerging New World Order: From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani* (2021) points out to the important developments between Iran and the Eastern countries including Russia. He believes that Iran persuades its policies with Russia and other Eastern countries in the context of “look to the East” slogan formulated during Iranian president Ahmadinejad. As Fathollah-Nejad argues, Iran’s oriental policy is a result of its dissatisfaction with the West (p.320). It can be argued that actors such as Russia shares Iran’s anti-US position. In the secret Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995 between Russia and the United States, Moscow was prohibited from selling arms to Iran. The agreement stayed in effect till 2000, when Putin came to power and revoked it. However, after nuclear sanctions were applied to Iran in 2010, Russia delayed the delivery of S-300 missile system. The S-300 was delivered to Iran only after the JCPOA was implemented in January 2016 (Kozhanov, 2015). These examples best demonstrate that Russian policies toward Iran are significantly determined by U.S. policy.

Another scholar, Divsallar, A. (2019), identifies common perception of threats as a pillar of Russia-Iran security convergence. He argues that “both countries see their identity and stability as focal points threatened by the international order” (P. 112). He believes that “threats to their stability such as regime change policies and sanctions are at the top of their national security issues along with societal discontents, radical jihadist groups and military threats” (P. 113). He builds up his thesis that Iran-Russia security convergence despite the conflicting interests of the two countries are driven by international misrecognition and common perception of threats.

Some authors contribute intense Russia-Iran rapprochement to their perceived threat of regime change by western powers. Liik, E. G., Kadri, (2016) argue that both countries felt threatened by Western-led institutionalization of forceful regime change as a legitimate mechanism to shape security order. Therefore, both while firmly opposing it, have been able to rely on each other. External regime change is another common threat to Russia and Iran stability. Both countries share this vision that regime change policy has been persuaded against those governments that do not fit into the Western standards and national interest. For

example, on the Iranian side, Tehran has long been faced with open threats from the U.S. policy of regime change (Pelofsky, E. 2017).

Samoudi, A., & Norouzi Shahtouri, A. (2018) argue that “the Ukraine crisis convinced Moscow to improve its relations with the Middle Eastern states to prevent its international isolation” (P. 87). They identify the historic event of the annexation of Crimea by Russia as a crucial moment under which both countries established closer ties to one another. They believe that the events such as the Ukraine crisis and the implementation of JCPOA, led to intensified cooperation between Tehran and Moscow to encounter common security and military threats (P.78).

Therme, C. (2018) believes that the Russia-Iranian relations is influenced by the U.S. foreign policy. She believes that Iran’s reliance on receiving security support from Russian is deeply affected by the perceived threat of regime change from the U.S. (P. 560). Additionally, another common area of threat perception is a Western challenge to each of their national identities (P. 559). The Russian perception of a Western moral decadence is aligned with the Islamic Republic of Iran ideals of spirituality in the face of Western materialism. This rather cultural perception of a liberal Western hegemony fuels two countries alliance.

Avdaliani, E. (2018) describes the common fear of U.S. as the main driven of Russia-Iran relations. As he explains “to Russia, the US violates the post-Cold War order by ramping up military pressure on Moscow in the former Soviet space. To Iran, the US is trying to limit its nuclear ambitions as well as its geopolitical outreach throughout the Middle East” (P. 4).

Another scholar, Mohsen Milani, supports this argument that an anti-US view is an important factor in the building of Russia-Iran relations. According to Mohsen Milani “ Tehran, like Moscow desires a multipolar world in which Washington does not have the final say” (Milani, 2016).

All the scholars and authors who have been discussed above, agree on the role of U.S. factor and how common threat perceptions fuelled the convergence of Russia and Iran. Although, each of them considers a specific kind of threat perceived by Tehran and Moscow, enough to explain their cooperation.

## **Research Methodology**

Considering the research methodology, a case study is employed for the purpose of this thesis. Choosing case study as a methodology encompasses qualitative methods. (Gerring, 2004). Therefore a case study is considered as an empirical research.

This thesis is an exploratory study. As Kathleen M. Eisenhardt explains “case studies typically combine data collection methods such as archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations” (Eisenhardt, 1989, pp. 532-50).

The qualitative research methods have also been used in this research including document analysis, including massive data collections of papers by using of academic researchers, scholarly articles, scientific journals and books. Additionally, this thesis will benefit from reports and official documents of states.

Another set of research methods such as descriptive, analytical and historical will be employed too. With regards to descriptive method, the goal is to offer general information about the development of Russia-Iran alliance in the light of U.S. factor. Considering analytical method, the aim is to analyses the circumstances and events under which Russia-Iran alliance were developed. And eventually, historical method is used to allow the author to include a retrospective approach to the case study.

### **Structure of thesis**

This thesis will be structured into 4 main chapters. Following the introduction, **the Second chapter** will be dedicated to the theoretical framework. More specifically, this part will present the theory of balance of threat introduced by Waltz’s book “Origins of Alliances” published in 1984. His work has been influential in the alliances debates since it provided a revision in previous understanding of state’s alliance which was based upon balance of power theory introduced by Kenneth Waltz. recent research of alliances cannot be carried out without having mentioned Waltz’s thoughts (Stuenkel, 2013; Macdonald, 1989, p. 796 – 8). As such, Stephen Waltz’s theory is a crucial element in my thesis arguments would be based upon.

According to the theory of balance of threat, Russian-Iranian relations can be analysed within the theoretical framework of Stephen Waltz. In fact, the theory of perception of threat would explain how and why the U.S. factor has been crucial in shaping Russian-Iranian relations.

**The third chapter** will cover the United States role and its impact as an independent variable. As shown above, the United States factor has consistently affected Russia-Iran alliance. Therefore, it is the objective of this thesis to analyze this variable in a rather structured manner. Meanwhile while analyzing the U.S. factor, Iran-Russia nuclear cooperation will be examined and how the United States played a critical point in shaping those relations, specifically with regards to nuclear cooperation.



**The fourth chapter** will discuss how the Iran-U.S. rapprochement affected the relations between Moscow and Tehran. It will be shown that Moscow by perceiving threat from this rapprochement start to establish closer ties with Iran.

**On the fourth chapter**, the recent event of Ukraine War 2022 will be touched upon. As it will be discussed, Iran and Russia military, political and financial cooperation intensified after this event. We will analyze how the common threat perceptions from the United States led to this alliance.

**The thesis will end with a conclusion**, which will highlight all the main findings of the research.

## **Chapter 2; Theoretical considerations**

### **Theory choice and thesis outline**

In order to answer my research questions, I employ the **theory of balance of threat** laid out in Stephen Walt's book the Origins of Alliances which was published in 1984 and offered a revision in realism school of thought in the international relations. In this book, Walt suggests "In contrast to traditional balance of power theorists, however, I suggest that states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone...Thus I propose balance of threat theory as a better alternative than balance of power theory" (Walt, 1990, P. 5). This enhances our understanding of Russia-Iran relations and the security concerns that both countries deal with.

Theories of alliance explain that states in order to achieve their goals in the modern time must ally, and this is the case when those states share the same security, political, and economic concerns. Throughout history, alliance has been a core phenomenon in international politics. George Liska believes that any discussion of international relations would be incomplete in the absence of a discussion of alliances (Liska, G. 1968).

Main theories of international relations, especially realism and neorealism, maintain that in facing common threats or perception of common threats, states enter into the formation of alliance in the international system.

Kenneth Waltz, a theorist of neorealism emphasizes that alliances are a result of the security concerns, maintaining that in an international anarchic system, do not cooperate with each other, but create balance to confront each other. Consequently, alliances are formed by states to counter against powers in order to survive within an anarchic system.

In offering a new perspective, Stephen Walt, relies on the theory of balance of threat instead of balance of power to explain the formation of alliances. In the next paragraph, Stephen Walt's theory would be introduced.

Walt's theory of balance of threat can be briefly explained based on four fundamental assumptions;

1. States react to threat, not to power.
2. Element of threat is defined by aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions
3. State's response to the perceived threat is either bandwagoning strategy or formation of alliance (balancing)
4. Ideological affinity, economic and military help and political penetration are amongst the most impactful elements for the formation of alliances between the states.

#### **1) States react to threat, not to power.**

The balance of power theory predicts that states form alliances against the most powerful state in the international alliance; nevertheless Walt believes "In contrast to traditional balance of power theorists, however, I suggest that states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone... Thus I propose balance of threat theory as a better alternative than balance of power theory" (Walt, 1990, P. 5). Walt does not consider the balance of power wrong, rather fragile, since power element is not the only factor in the formation of alliances and balancing, but it is one of them. "Although power is an important part of the equation, it

is not the only one. It is more accurate to say that states tend to ally with or against the foreign power that poses the greatest threat” (Walt, 1990, P. 21).

**2) Elements of threat is defined by aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions.**

In the beginning of his book, “Origins of Alliances” Walt poses this question that “How do statesmen choose among potential threats when seeking external support?” (Walt, 1990, P.1). In answering this question, he considers four elements that affect the level of threat; 1) aggregate power; 2) proximity; 3) offensive capability; and 4) offensive intentions (Walt, 1985, P. 22). Aggregate Power means the state’s capacity in total including its population, industrial and military capability and technological powers. The greater is state power, according to these elements, the greater threat it can cause with regards to other states (Walt, 1985, P. 9).

According to Walt, power states are a source of threats for others since it is not possible to guarantee in which manner, they will exercise their power. States with aggregate power are capable to punish their enemies or reward their friends. Therefore, state’s aggregate power can either lead to bandwagoning or balancing (Walt, 1985, P. 10).

Geographical proximity refers to the territorial distance between rivalries. “Because the ability to project power declines with distance, states that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away” (Walt, 1990, P. 23).

Offensive power also points out to a state’s ability to pose threat to the sovereignty or the territorial integrity of another state. It is also closely related with aggregate power and geographical proximity. “The ease with which aggregate power can be converted into offensive power (i.e., by amassing large, mobile military capabilities) is affected by the various factors that determine the relative advantage to the offense or defence at any particular period” (Walt, 1990, P. 24).

And finally, aggressive intentions mean a state’s perception of a threat posed by a potential enemy (Walt, 1990, pp. 25-26). This variable shows that the more immediate the aggressive intentions are, the more likely the states will choose a balancing strategy.

**3) State’s response to the perceived threat is either bandwagoning strategy or formation of alliance (balancing)**

How states react to the perceived threats? That can be the central section of Walt’s theory. Are they more likely to enter in alliances with other states against the threatening state or they

would adopt bandwagoning policy? He believes that balancing is much more common than bandwagoning; when the level of threat rises, it would be more likely for the states to balance each other (Walt, 1990, pp. 28-29).

**4) Ideological affinity, economic and military help and political penetration are amongst the most impactful elements for the formation of alliances between the states**

Walt recognizes three factors important for the formation of alliances; ideological affinity, economic and military help and political penetration

**Ideological affinity**

According to Walt, ideological affinity between states is plausible with these characteristics; First, alignment with states which share same ideology is a way of defending the countries' political principles. Second, states with similar threats are less likely to fear one another, since they consider it hard to imagine that mentioned state will decide to attack them Third, alignment with a state sharing same ideology may lead to the enhancement of a weak state's legitimacy. And forth, the ideology itself may prescribe alignment between states. The most obvious example would be Marxism-Leninism (Walt, 1990, pp. 34-35).

**Economic and military help**

Walt continues that in addition to ideology, economic and military assistance plays a significant role in the formation of alliances. "the provision of economic or military assistance will create effective allies, either by demonstrating one's own favourable intentions, by evoking a sense of gratitude, or because the recipient will become dependent on the donor. Simply stated, the hypothesis is: the more aid, the tighter the resulting alliance" (Walt, 1985, P. 27).

**And political penetration**

Walt defines political penetration as "the covert or indirect manipulation of one state's political system by another" and considers it a strong factor in the convergence and formation of alliances between states.

Political penetration may be exercised in the following ways;

1) Public officials whose loyalties are divided may use their positions to move one state closer to another;

2) Lobbying organizations may be used to alter policy decisions and public perceptions regarding a potential ally;

3) Foreign propaganda may be used to sway elite and mass attitudes (Walt, 1985, pp. 30).

Overall, in Balance of Threat theory, Walt believes that states in facing a common threat enter into alliances based on similar ideology, shared political landscape and cooperation in military and defence sectors. The aim of this thesis would be to explained Russia-Iran alliance according to balance of threat theory offered by Stephen M. Walt.

### **Chapter 3; U.S. Factor; Iran-Russia Nuclear Cooperation**

**In this chapter, we will demonstrate the relations between Iran and Russia in the nuclear cooperation aspect. As it will be shown, the U.S. factor has played a very significant role in shaping those relations. Additionally, we will show that Tehran-Washington ongoing confrontation and Iran's concern regarding U.S. threat during 1991-2012 was the most important factor in Iran-Russia convergence.**

After the dissolution of Soviet Union, the United States became an important element in shaping Russia-Iran relations. Russian analysts considered "Maintaining a certain level of positive dialogue with the West (primarily the United States)" by Moscow as a critical driver in Russia-Iran relations.

The trend of Russia-Iran relations after the collapse of USSR in December 1991 illustrates the U.S. interference and threats in specific areas; namely defense and industrial cooperation, as well as peaceful nuclear cooperation. The Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995 is the best example as such. The Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement prohibited the sale of Russia's conventional weapons to Iran and caused disruption in the transfer of technical know-how and nuclear equipment to Iran. Additionally, it persuaded Russia to cooperate with the United States in approving the resolutions of the IAEA Board of Governors and the United Nations Security Council on imposing sanctions on Iran, all of these indicate the destructive role of the United States on Russia-Iran relations after the fall of Soviet Union.

In fact, Moscow's desire to establish relations with Washington D.C. in the first few years after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, encouraged Russia authorities to use Iran card in its political games with the United States (Kozhanov, 2015, P. 5).

This agreement was signed in 1995 in the framework of the joint economic commission of the two countries by Viktor Chernomerdin, then Prime Minister of Russia, and Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States. According to this agreement, Russia was committed not to sign new arms contracts with Iran. And in return, the United States promised while refraining from putting pressure on the ongoing plans between Russia and Iran, not to take punitive measures against Russia according to the 1992 Congress law. The agreement allowed Russia to fulfill existing contracts with Iran, including submarines, torpedoes, anti-ship mines and tanks. Later on, controversy erupted in U.S. Congress over a 1995 *aide memoire* between Vice President Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin concerning conventional arms sales from Moscow to Iran. Under the terms of

the agreement the United States would signal no opposition to the completion of already-contracted arms transfers on the understanding that no transfers would take place after December 31, 1999. (Broder, 2000).

The United States intention in concluding the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement was clearly to destroy Russia-Iran relations and prevent Iran from accessing advanced technology. Additionally, Russia expected that the American authorities would start cooperation with Russian military industries and stop the delivery of American military equipment that are not included in the sanctions to the Middle East region and Russia's neighboring countries.

With the closure of the Gore-Chernomardi case and Tehran-Moscow nuclear cooperation, Iranian nuclear program became another subject for U.S. intervention. In analysing the U.S. role with respect to Moscow's approach to Tehran's nuclear program, even according to Russian analyst "Maintaining a certain level of positive dialogue with the West (primarily the United States)" played the most significant role in Russia's approach and policies with regards to the Iran nuclear program (Kozhanov, 2012, P. ).

The first signs of America's intervention in the nuclear cooperation between Iran and Russia appeared in the second half 90s; in April 1998, the Ministry of Atomic Energy of Russia announced that Russia is willing to send a nuclear research reactor to Iran which has the capacity of enrichment up to 20%. Again, American pressure prevented the delivery of the nuclear reactor to Tehran. Washington was deeply worried that the equipment is used in uranium enrichment until reaching the production level of nuclear weapons. Realizing the sensitivity of the issue, Russia agreed to postpone the delivery of equipments to Iran (Orlov, 2002, P. 126).

In July 1998, the successful test of Shahab 3 medium-range missile, strengthened the position of people who insisted on U.S. sanctions on Russia companies assisting this test. For Shahab 3, Iran entered to an agreement with North Korea to receive shipments and technology transfers of the No Dong 1 missile during the 1990s. Subsequently, Iran renamed the missile Shahab 3 and first tested it in 1998. In December 1998, a CIA report stated that "Russia's assistance accelerated the construction of Shahab 3, and the nuclear goods imported from Russia will help Iran in the research and development of nuclear weapons". Following this report in January 1999, the United States sanctioned two main institutions and eight other Russian organizations (Gordon, 1999).

Although the Russia-U.S. rapprochement in the second half of the 90s caused a delay in delivering of Russia military equipment to Tehran, but the tension between Moscow and

Washington D.C during the first years of the new century revealed its effects on the Iranian-Russian relations. Following the meeting between president Putin and president Khatami in New York in 2000, a joint declaration of the basic principles of cooperation between the two countries was reached. Given the new circumstance, Russia, despite the pressures of America In July 2002, announced that it will not only complete the construction of the Bushehr power plant, but also will build 5 new nuclear power plants worth 10 billion dollars in Iran (Baker, 2002).

Meanwhile, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia announced that Russia will continue to send fuel to Bushehr power plant even if Iran does not sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Gazeta, 2003).

Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP) is Tehran's first commercial nuclear reactor. In 1994, Iran and Russia signed a deal to construct the VVER 1000MWe light-water reactor. The Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant is unique in design because Russian authorities agreed to incorporate its VVER technology into the original German-built infrastructure. Between December 2007 and January 2008, Iran received a total of 82 tons of fuel from Russia for the initial fuel loading of the BNPP.

On November 2013 the E3/EU+3 talks in Geneva resulted in the Joint Plan of Action (JCPA), which allowed the IAEA 24-hour access to the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant for inspections. On July 2015, the E3/EU+3 and Iran finalized the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Although the JCPOA does not specifically mention the Bushehr nuclear facility, but the agreement stipulates that Iran intends to ship out all spent nuclear fuel and will not engage in spent fuel reprocessing for 15 years to come.

Russia's cooperation with Iran in the development of nuclear technology and assistance in the development of missile technology Iran was also part of the talks between the Russian and American leaders, as during the meeting between them in St. Petersburg in May 2002 it became a serious matter. In defense of cooperation with Iran, Putin stated that Western companies and not Russian ones are assisting Iran in the development of nuclear technology (Hutcheson, 2002).

As a result of this change in Russia's approach, during the years of 2006 and 2007, the export of military equipment reached up to 1 billion dollars, including defense systems, missiles and war planes. Following Putin's visit to Tehran in 2007 and the contract of selling S-300 missile defense system, Russia-Iran cooperation became even much more. Iran and Russia signed an \$800 million contract for S-300 missile defense system in December 2007 after eight years of negotiation. With Barak Obama coming to power in Washington and Dmitri



Medvedev in Moscow and the start of Reset phase between U.S. and Russia, relations between Moscow and Tehran again worsened. This new period was coupled with Moscow's support of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions of 1887 (2009) and 1929 (2010). On June 9, 2010 the UN Security Council approved Resolution 1929, its fourth round of sanctions against Tehran for Iran's failure to halt the most controversial elements of its nuclear program. The resolution contained the toughest sanctions imposed against the country to date, including a ban on exporting three major categories of conventional weapons. The resolution was supported by all five permanent members of the UN Security Council, including the Russia. Moscow also refused to send S-300 defense missile system to Iran and supported the implementation of heavy banking and financial sanctions against Tehran. According to some Russian experts, Moscow's actions had irreparable consequences in Russia-Iran relations (Trenin & Malashenko, 2010: 25-26).

With changing conditions in the relations between Russia and America in 2011 and Moscow's feeling of threat from the United States, due to developments such as America's insistence on establishing a missile system, the reconstruction of Washington-Moscow relations practically failed. As a result, with a feeling of perceived threat from America, establishing close relations with Iran became once more important in Russia's foreign policy. Subsequently, cooperation in industrial and military aspects intensified and Russia started sending electronic warfare's equipment to Tehran (Blank, 2011).

At the same time, the Russia authorities political literature noticeably changed compared to the past, as an example, Dmitry Medvedev, the president of Russia at the time, said in an interview with the Wall Street Journal "The difference between Washington and Moscow in Iran's nuclear issue is that Iran is not America's partner whereas Moscow interacts constructively with Tehran". He also stated that "apart from economic relations, we (Russia and Iran) face common threats such as drug trafficking and we are facing terrorist threats. We continue to cooperate with Iran as a neighbor and a political partner" ([www.kremlin.ru/news/8082](http://www.kremlin.ru/news/8082)).

The developments indicate that the United States efforts were aimed at preventing Iran from strengthening its military, scientific and industrial power, in the framework of the strategy against Tehran's nuclear program. This undeniably impacted the course of relations between Russia and Iran during the first 20 years of relations. The above-mentioned situation changed after the re-election of Putin as president in 2012, and Hassan Rouhani's coming to power in August 2013; the break-out of tensions between Moscow and Washington D.C. as a result of 2014 Ukraine crisis and subsequent economic sanctions imposed by the European Union

(EU) on the Kremlin, draw Moscow to strengthen cooperation with Tehran. In the next chapter this new phase of relations will be discussed.

### **Chapter 3; U.S. threat and Russia's perception of Iran-U.S. rapprochement (2013-2015)**

**In this chapter, we will discuss on Russia's perception of threat arose from Tehran-Washington rapprochement, led Moscow to establish closer ties with Tehran. Russia, be feeling a threat from Iran and**

Since March 2012 that Vladimir Putin by winning the presidential election succeeded Dmitry Medvedev, Russian's foreign policy significant changed. The most noticeable element was altering the course of interaction to confrontation between Moscow and Washington D.C.

This circumstance obviously impacted Russian-Iranian relations, to the extent that by Vladimir Putin's election as the Russian president in 2012 " Russian-Iranian relations have experienced a significant change of course in contrast to the substantial cooling of the bilateral dialogue during the last two years of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency" (Kozhanov, 2015, P. 1).

On this occasion, Russia's approach to Iran has causes beyond bilateral relations. Although several factors, such as the "Arab Spring", Russia's concerns regarding the developments in the Middle East, losing its traditional partner, and eventually the convergence of interests between Tehran and Moscow in the Syrian crisis, played a significant role in shaping Russia-Iran relations. Nevertheless, the continuance of tense relations between Moscow and Washington D.C. due to the Ukraine Crisis, on the one hand, and Tehran's different approach to the U.S. and Europe and its desire to reach a nuclear agreement, on the other hand, made the United States the most crucial factor in shaping Russia-Iran relations. According to these developments, the Russian President who was disappointed with previous efforts to resolve the tense relations with the West, became determined more than ever to strengthen its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Kozhanov, 2015, P. 9-10).

The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomed Putin's new approach., realizing the fact that tensions between Moscow and the West made Russia establish closer ties with Tehran,

From Tehran's perspective, given the continuation of threats and Iran's tense relations with the U.S. regional allies in conflicts such as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, Russia's new approach to strengthening ties with the authorities in Iran became an appealing policy.

The shared interests of Russia and Iran, as well as the similar policies of the two countries regarding the U.S. behaviours, include various forms such as opposition to US-led

international order, Washington D.C. unilateralism, confronting the unipolar international system, and rejecting the overthrow of governments of Ukraine and Syria.

Iran's foreign policy is heavily dependent on Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, therefore in order to anticipate Iran's foreign policy it is important to understand his mindset.

Khamenei was considered a pragmatist politician before he became the Supreme leader in 1989, according to CIA report published in 1986. The CIA considered him under the influence of Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the most influential Iranian politicians, but in office Khamenei took radical leftist views, adopting extremist opposition against the West, Capitalism and the United States. Khamenei who was primarily considered a right-wing. Abandoned pragmatism in its foreign policy to weaken left-wingers and attract the support of Iran's security apparatus- namely the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Kambiz Fatahi, BBC).

Khamenei's perspective of the international order is based on three axes of global power. The first—the liberal order based on institutions created after World War II—is weakening in his view because American hegemony in the world is seriously declining. A second axis, formed by Moscow and Beijing, is seen as rising. The third axis joins Iran with this rising new world order with Moscow and Beijing, adopting a policy of “look to the East,” and abandoning the old slogan of “Neither East, nor West” that was dominant after the 1979 revolution. In this regard, Iran and China signed a 25 years old agreement. The Iran–China 25-year Cooperation Program or Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China is a 25-year cooperation agreement on the further development of Iran–China relations which promises China agreed to invest \$400 billion in Iran over 25 years in exchange for a steady supply of oil to fuel its growing economy (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>).

In the recent case of Ukraine war, the Iranian officials believe that we are witnessing U.S. power decline. Iranian officials still assert that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a sign of the US losing strength. This was echoed by Khamenei recently on April 26, when he said, “The issues of the recent war in Ukraine should be seen more deeply and in the context of the formation of a new world order ”(Khamenie, 2022).

The process of Russia's opposition to the unipolar system and US global policies started in 2007 and Putin's speech at the Munich Security Summit; Putin in his speech stated that unilateral actions and the use of military force with no regards for international law only causes the spread of terrorism and the pursuit of nuclear weapons by countries that feel threatened by America. Consequently, he criticized American foreign policy as destabilizing

And threatening to the world and Russia's security (Putin's Speech, Munich, 2007). One of top's Putin's advisor once stated to the Americans, "we want to cooperation with you...but please open your eyes. We will never accept that the United States will be the dominant power in the world (Ignatius,2007).

Russia's historical concern about Iran and U.S. rapprochement should be considered as another reason for increased attention of Russia to strengthen relations with Islamic Republic of Iran. This concern during the years after the collapse, mainly revealed more than others during the two periods of presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani. During Khatami Presidency, following the reports about the possibility of the opening of the US Embassy in Tehran in 2008, the online newspaper R. B. K. Daily of Russia in an article referring to this topic, wrote " The loss of Iran for Russia means a big failure diplomatic and strategic... Iran is one of the most important allies of Russia in the Middle East region and the world, and losing such an ally means a big failure in diplomatic and strategic scene for Russia" (R.B.K. Daily of Russia, 2008).

Yet with the forming of the 11th government in Iran, Russia's attention and sensitivity to Tehran-Washington relations, Russia decided to strengthen and develop its political and economic ties with Iran. From Russia's point of view, Hassan Rouhani's speech at the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2013 clearly showed that the improvement of relations between Tehran and the West has the highest priority for him and this issue was alarming for Moscow. In the speech delivered at the United Nations, Iranian new president, Hassan Rouhani states that peace is within reach and offered immediate negotiation aimed at removing any legitimate concerns over Iran's nuclear program (Kozhanov, 2015. P. 10).

The prospects and consequences of improving relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America has been a topic for Russian researchers, yet no single point of view has been reached. Some analysts like Vitaly Naumkin, a famous Russian orientalist and Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor of the prestigious publication "Russia in World Affairs" due to the depth of differences between Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, consider any tangible improvement between the two countries as impossible.

Lukyanov, for example, write that "Hassan Rouhani's coming to power... provided an excuse to change the tone of the conversation (with the United States of America)... but It does not mean that Iran and the United States have cleared all "red lines"...Iran will never be the Washington ally because of cultural, psychological and political reasons. The United States itself cannot turn over all the cards at once... (Lukyanov, 2013).

Lukyanov even evaluated this Iran-U.S. rapprochement positively and believes, ‘‘Russia has historically good relationship with Iranians, so it should take this situation as promising. Although, he commented cautiously in explaining the possible consequences of the rapprochement between Iran and America, He says ‘‘Of course, it is possible that a country that was our friend during the hard times will become interested in others after reducing the pressure and weakening the foreign isolation. However, we will maintain special relations with this country (Iran)’’ (Lukyanov, 2013).

Some other analysts also believe that the possible rapprochement between Iran and the United States will not only bring damaging consequences for Moscow, but also provide the opportunity for two countries (Iran and Russia) to extend cooperation (Kozhanov, 2015, P.1)

According to them, the economic sanctions caused by Iran's nuclear program are an important obstacle in the way of developing relations and benefiting from all the existing economic and commercial capacities between two countries. Levan Jagarian, former Russian ambassador in Tehran in an interview with Rianavosti news agency regarding the consequences of nuclear agreement and changing the approach of Iran's foreign policy stated, ‘‘Speaking that in the case of Iran's proximity to America and the western countries, Russia can lose its influence in this region is baseless. Moscow considers Tehran one of the important regional partners. In addition, Russia consider the normalization of relations between the Islamic Republic as a necessary condition to solve many international issues, including Iran's nuclear program’’.

Rajab Safarov, another known Iran-Russia analyst hold a positive view on the consequences of improving relations between Tehran and the West. In an interview with the website, IRAS Institute, he says that in Russia, a number of experts and politicians who create information and expertise on this issue, worry deeply that by establishing relations between Iran and the West, Tehran will lose its motivation toward Russia...these concerns are reasonable to some extent, but I argue it is not the case. Iran and America have their own red lines and have always had a series of conflicts with each other...Russia is interested in the improvement of Tehran-West relations since Western pressure on Russia would be lifted and economic doors would be open, this improvement then, is in Moscow’s interest.

Contrary to the rather positive views shown above, many other Russian analysts consider improving of relations between Iran and America as not only possible, but also a clear threat

to Russia's interests. As a result, any sign of Washington-Tehran rapprochement, especially in the face of increasing tensions between Russia and the West must face the immediate sensitivity of Russia and the aim of strengthening relations with Tehran. according to their belief, by resolving the differences between Washington and Tehran, the Kremlin will lose Iran as the counterbalancing power against the United States of America and the European Union. As a result, The Islamic Republic authorities lose their interest in relations with Russia. Economically, the progress of trade between Tehran and the West can lead to the return of foreign companies the Iranian market, which in turn narrows and limit the space for Russian participation in Iran because in many economic-commercial fields, Russian companies and institutions cannot compete with European and American companies.

This group of Russian analysts even believed that Moscow's sabotage in nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West has obvious positive consequences for Russia, since the continuation of the nuclear conflict will hinder the rapprochement between Iran and America and maintain the political and economic position of Russia in Iran. As a result, some Russian analysts who are also close to government circles unofficially stressed the necessity of continuing tension over Iran's nuclear program (Kozhanov, 2012, P. 15).

The existence of such tendencies in Russia is basically based on their historical awareness of Iran's capabilities in making a change in its foreign policy approach. The Russian authorities does not fully trust Iran and worries about the danger of Iran's proximity to America (Kozhanov, 2012, XII). Russian authorities in post-Soviet era has always been sensitive and distrustful of any Iranian initiative to improve relations with America and considered Iran's desire to strengthen relations with Russia as Tehran's "Plan B" in the case of tensions between Tehran and the West (Arabadzhyan, 2003, p.9-10).

Of course, this concern and mistrust has not been clearly mentioned from Russian officials or diplomats and the official views of Russia are always based on components such as the superiority of negotiation and the normalization of Iran-US relations; Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov An article referring to the nuclear negotiations with Iran stated, 'real security for the present and the future can only be achieved by establishing cooperation and normal relations with all governments... using force against Iran means threatening energy security of Europe and the world. The problem can only be solved through the normalization of relations with Tehran' (Lavrov, 2007).

Contrary to official views, intellectual circles are more vocal to Russia's concerns regarding Iran and in their writings and analysis, while not welcoming the rapprochement of Iran and America, they have even accused a range of Iranian politicians and technocrats of favoring the West and lack of interests by them to develop relations with Moscow.

The Haidar Jamal article, one of known Russian Islamic thinker, is the most obvious symbol of this thinking. He first points out that "many liberal and Marxist intellectuals, as well as a significant part The Western-oriented bourgeoisie participated in the joint struggle against the Pahlavi dynasty... They are technocrats who have obtained higher education in the West for generations and do not believe in Islamic values... the representatives of this group are working in almost all ministries and institutions... the West tries through these same technocrats to play a political game in Iran... this group executes orders instructed by the West and try to create obstacles in the technical cooperation between Iran and Russia. The powerful liberal lobby in a very short period of time penetrated all the liberal press, university professors, renowned experts and even some members of Iran's parliament are united on this anti-Russian alliance'' (Jamal, 2013, pp.28-35).

Apart from the above-mentioned different and conflicting views, what has happened over the past two years indicate that there has been an unprecedented closeness and convergence between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russian Federation in all dimensions and different political, security, defense areas including bilateral economic-commercial as well as effective cooperation in regional issues such as the Syrian war, so that the year 2015 can be an important turning point in the history of relations between Iran and Russia, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this period there has been visits by presidents of the two countries, numerous trips and negotiations of ministers and other political, security and economic officials and signing several important basic documents in order to provide the necessary infrastructure for facilitation of traffic and trade of the nationals of the two countries and most importantly, cooperation and convergence in regional issues, especially Syria, indicate the beginning of a new era in Tehran-Moscow relations.

If we accept the decisive role of Vladimir Putin in formulating strategy and Russia's foreign policy, the translation of his statements about Iran is that the relations between Iran and Russia has a bright future, especially in the conditions of continued tension between Russia and America.



From Islamic Republic perspective, realizing the importance of Russia as a neighboring country, a great global power with vast political-economic capacities, strengthening relations with Moscow is very crucial. Putin's visit to Tehran and his constructive negotiations with Senior officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran along with the signature of several important infrastructure documents, unprecedented exchange of delegations and consultations between the officials of the two countries in political and security fields during 2015 and Russia's cooperation with Iran's positions on key regional issues, especially the Middle East, shows the appropriate level of relations between these two countries.

**In the last two chapters, we proposed the issue that the relations between Iran and Russia have extended since Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2012; by providing an overview of the relations between Tehran and Moscow during 25 last year, it tried to prove the hypothesis that the U.S. policies is the most important factor which has shaped the Iran-Russia relations in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.**

In the period from 1992 to 2012, Russia's strategy of maintaining and strengthening relations with America and Russia's cautious behavior in the framework of UN sanctions and unilateral sanctions limited the space for the development of relations with Tehran. **For the Islamic Republic of Iran, facing political-military and economic threats from United States of America, strengthening relations with Russia could be a valuable alternative in meeting the country's security needs. In another words, the Islamic Republic of Iran, by constructing U.S. threat, felt the necessity to persuade closer ties with Moscow despite security perceived threats from Washington D.C. in the Nuclear Program framework.**

The new era of relations between Iran and Russia began in 2012 with Vladimir Putin's coming to power. Although in all the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, maintaining a friendly relationship with America has been a basic element of Russia's foreign policy, but America's contemptuous attitude towards Russia and Washington's efforts in order to develop its political-security influence in the sphere of Russia's vital interests especially in the post-Soviet geographical space, which faced Moscow's resistance, created a situation that many compared to the Cold War era. **Meanwhile, Hassan Rouhani's election as the new Iranian president and his de-escalating policies with regards to tensions with the West and the United States, made Russia to strengthen relations with Tehran. In another word, tension and confrontation in Moscow-Washington relations and increased**

**perceived threats from America by Russia since 2012, has played an important role that Russia would persuade closer ties with Iran.**

## **Chapter 4; U.S. threat and Iran-Russia cooperation in war of Ukraine (2022)**

**In this chapter we will focus on how NATO expansion works as a similar threat perceived by Russia and Iran. In order to better understand the pillar of Russia and Iran security convergence in the Ukraine war including sending drones, we will shed light on the pillar of common threat perceptions. As it will be show, by creating similar threat perception, Russia and Iran generate the necessary condition for their cooperation.**

This chapter covers the security convergence of Iran and Russia in the Ukraine war. The Ukraine war started on 24 February 2022 when Russia launched a large-scale military operation against Kiev. This tectonic event unleashed new waves in the international politics and caused many questions. Iran has supplied the Russian army with drones, and this has even been confirmed by the Iranian foreign minister. Hossein Amirabdollahian acknowledged that ‘ ‘ We gave a limited number of drones to Russia months before the Ukraine war,’ ’ this comment come after months of confusing messaging from Iran about the weapons shipment, as Russia sends the drones slamming into Ukrainian energy infrastructure and civilian targets. This increased military cooperation come whereas Tehran is under crippling economic sanctions, political pressure and an unknown future for its ongoing talks with global powers over the fate of The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear deal reached between Iran and P5+1 and subsequently the Trump Administration withdrew from it on 2018.

Despite numerous research analysis into the Russia-Iran relations, questions remain on the fundamentals of their cooperation. Russia and Iran have persuaded similar policies throughout the years; this chapter demonstrates that the pillars of security convergence in the Ukraine War can be understood through Iran and Russia’s similar feelings of ‘ ‘**common threat perceptions**’ ’ received from the Unites States.

Iran’s position on the Ukraine war has been controversial, especially after news of drones being sent to Russia in its war against Ukraine. Iranian officials believe that the expansion of the NATO to the east created tensions and this led to the war. However, the expansion of NATO does not forgo the need for diplomacy. Ali Bahadori Jahromi, the spokesman for the Iranian government, said concerns about the expansion of NATO are understandable but diplomacy is necessary. Security concerns about the growing and provocative trend of NATO expansion to the East are understandable for all independent countries and those opposing

U.S. dominance. At the same time, compliance with international law and humanitarian law and reliance on dialogue and diplomacy are necessary to stop conflicts,” the spokesman said on Twitter (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/470492/Iran-s-position-on-Ukraine-war-explained>).

Iran’s position toward the crisis in Ukraine has two sides: Understanding Russia’s concerns over NATO expansion and favoring diplomacy over war. This was clear in the statement Khatibzadeh issued, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman. He said, “Unfortunately provocative moves by NATO spearheaded by the U.S. have led to a situation which has pushed the Eurasian region on the cusp of a big crisis.”

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei sets overall direction of the country, so understating his personal worldview is crucial in interpretation Iran’s foreign policy (Khamenei, 2021). Like Russia, he perceives the international order as hegemonic imposed by the United States that needs revision, and Iran’s resistance to U.S. policies in the Middle-East and involvement in the Ukraine war by sending drones best demonstrates the similarity of his worldview with Russia and Putin.

In a meeting with students, Khamenei said: “today, the world is on the threshold of a new international order, which, after the era of bipolar world order and the theory of unipolar world order, is taking shape. In [the] current period, of course, the US has become weaker day by day” (Khamenei, 2022). He states this comment in the aftermath of the Russia invasion of Ukraine. According to him and some Iranian scholars, the U.S. hegemony is declining and Russia’s policies in challenging and opposing the U.S. world order creates the condition that Iran and Russia pursue converging policies given the common threat perceptions. Foad Izadi, a well-known Iranian theorist and professor at Tehran University, shares the view that the U.S. is declining “ We are witnessing the decline of the United States in various areas, including social and economic. This situation is not reversible and unstoppable. Many of the world’s problems will be solved with the decline of the United States (Izadi, 2022).

This world view is the key in understanding the root causes taken by Iranian authorities to support Russia in the war in Ukraine.

Likewise, Russia’s seizure of Crimea and now its further incursions into Ukraine clearly challenge established norms of the liberal world order such as Russia’s use of military force which is against the non-intervention principle at the heart of U.N. Charter.

As explained above, both Tehran and Moscow understand the international liberal order as hegemonic which the U.S. lead and two countries believe the U.S. power is in decline. Now

in the next section we turn into the causes behind their cooperation. As it will be explained, **both Russia and Iran share common threat perception from the United States.** And this has accelerated their convergence in security issues and made the United States a critical factor in shaping their relations. At the previous chapters, the U.S. factor and its involvement and intervention had been thoroughly touched upon on issues such as Iran and Russia nuclear cooperation. On this chapter, while building up on U.S. factor, we will demonstrate how the common threat perceptions led to their security cooperation, especially in event of 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In doing so, **similar threat perception from the United States including NATO, long-term threat to stability and other common issues will be examined.**

As noted by Iranian leaders, NATO threat play a fundamental role in two countries' threat perception. NATO's expansion to the east and the US military build-up in the Middle East and Central Asia region are also considered two major common threats. In this manner, while Russia's deep feeling of insecurity toward NATO has a long history and NATO-Russia tensions over NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe are nothing new, NATO's threat to Iran is a rather recent factor to be discussed (Rumer, 2016, P.18). Although NATO is not an imminent threat to Iran, its military build up push Tehran closer to Moscow.

Russia has continually signalled concerned over NATO's expansion into its borders. The first major incident broke out in 1993. During a meeting with then Polish president Lech Wałęsa in Warsaw, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin in a written statement expressed his "understanding" of Poland's desire to join the NATO organization (Jane Perlez, 1993). However, just a few weeks later, in October 1993, Boris Yeltsin sent a letter to then U.S. president Bill Clinton stating his opposition to membership in the alliance for Poland or any other Eastern European country (Roger Cohen,1993). Yeltsin's change of position was due to pressure from the Russian military establishment, which still considered NATO a threat. Russia's opposition toward the NATO enlargement was shared by politicians from all spectrums. The conservatives, including the Communists and the nationalists opposed it due to geopolitical reasons. The liberals, opposed it since they saw it as damaging their already shaking position in Russian domestic politics.

NATO's threat perception from Iranian side has first been appeared in the 2010 Lisbon Summit Report of the Group of Experts, NATO's New Strategic Concept. NATO's military mechanism made Iranian decision makers to agree that NATO's presence in Iran's periphery is a threat (Kiani,2016, p.74).

Tehran perceives the NATO's expansion to the east, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the deployment of missiles in the Persian Gulf as part of a big plan to strengthen U.S. hegemony in the region.

Simultaneously, Iran's opposition to the U.S. military presence in the Middle-East and Central Asia dates back to as early as 1980s and has ever since remained as an important element in Iranian decision makers policies. Tehran perceives U.S. presence in the region as part of a plan to shape the security order of the region into the one that serves U.S. interest and its allies. Arguably, Iran feels threatened by U.S. military presence in almost all neighbouring countries except for Armenia. In total, there are 422 military airports around Iran. These are considered direct military threat from the United States by Tehran, in 2007-2008 when the intelligence services published reports discussing the possibility of a US strike against Tehran.

However, Russians are not persuading a similar policy like Iran to push out Americans as there are not a direct military threat by bases around Moscow. Nevertheless, Moscow perceived U.S. presence in the Middle East and the Caucasus as a security challenge since they are part of the U.S.'s strategic global power projection in order to reinforce U.S.-led world order. As noted by Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei in his meeting with President Putin in November 2017, U.S. military presence in the Middle East region is a common threat to both its long-term plan is against two countries interests (Khamenei, 2017). This common threat perception regarding the 2022 Ukraine war was echoed by Iranian officials in days after the start of war. Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh added that "the Eurasia region is on the verge of entering a pervasive crisis" because of NATO's expansion led by the United States.

Iran's ambassador to Russia also noted how NATO's expansion in the region pose a similar threat to both Moscow and Tehran. Kazem Jalali, speaking during a virtual conference dubbed Relations Between Iran and Russia in the Light of New Regional Developments, says the two countries are closely cooperating on international issues, despite existing difference of opinion. "In Caucasus, Afghanistan and West Asia, we and Russia need to stand together and cooperate. It is natural that both us and the Russians do not consider NATO's expansion to our borders as serving our interests", he said. He was expressing these comments in response to criticism of Iran's supportive stance of Russia in war against Ukraine. At the end he pointed out that "The Islamic Republic of Iran is no country's fiefdom and we are even not after moving toward the East. We are after creating a balance between the East and the West" (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202202287862>). In a similar comment, the Iranian foreign

minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, told UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres that that the root-cause of the conflict in Ukraine lies in NATO's eastward expansion (<https://en.irna.ir/news/84959320/Iran-FM-War-in-Ukraine-rooted-in-NATO-s-eastward-expansion>).

Similar to Iran, Russia also perceives threat from NATO expansion. The role of NATO-a transatlantic alliance founded in 1949 to counter the Soviet Union in Europe- has been problematic ever since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia's deep feeling of insecurity toward NATO's eastward expansion dates back to years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president in post-Soviet era noted that "We believe that the eastward expansion of NATO is a mistake and a serious one at that", told reporters at a 1997 news conference with US President Bill Clinton in Helsinki, where the two signed a statement on arms control (<https://www.dw.com/en/nato-why-russia-has-a-problem-with-its-eastward-expansion/a-60891681>).

In the recent case of Ukraine, Putin in a televised remark said that "If Ukraine were to join NATO, it would serve as a direct threat to the security of Russia". In a similar comment, Russia considers U.S. and NATO as main threats to their national security. According to a new Russian naval doctrine signed by President Vladimir Putin, main challenges and threats to national security and development are Washington's strategic objective to dominate the world's oceans and NATO military expansion in moving toward Russia's borders(<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/07/31/russia-says-us-nato-main-threats-to-national-security-a78453>).

**As explained above, both Russia and Iran perceive threat from NATO, and they contribute the recent war in Ukraine to NATO expansion.**

Now in this part, we will answer this question that what are the pillar of common threat perceptions by Russia and Iran.

Both countries see their identity and stability as points threatened by the international order. Threats to their identity, in the Iranian case is the Islamic-Iranian identity and in the Russian case the conservative-messianic identity. At the other hands there are following threats to their stability; sanctions, regime change policies and military threats. In the next section, we will focus on identity threats.

Iran's Islamic-Iranian identity was particularly mentioned as a state priority in the sixth five-year Development Plan (2017-21) endorsed by Iranian supreme leader. Article 72 of this documents mention legal directives to respond to any soft threats against Iran's Islamic-

Iranian identity. Although threats to the identity were acknowledged by Iranian founder of the Iranian Revolution, Imam Khomeini, during the 1980s, during Khomeinism, they become the centre of Iran's threat perception. He has repeatedly said that the West has launched a cultural invasion against Iran's culture and the West wants Iranians to abandon their faith, values and Islamic principles. According to the Supreme Leader, cultural invasion means at least hundreds of audio, video, written and internet media in the world with the specific purpose of influencing the mind and behavior of the Iranian nation, add to that some computer games and imported toys among the examples that promote western behavior and lifestyle which affects the minds of Iranian children, teenagers and young people. In a general view, this tool can be considered as the most important and most widely used tool of the domination system to implement its aggressive and cultural policies. In much more detailed description, cultural invasion include 1- Education, language, translation and terms 2- Books and publications 3- Extensive advertising through technology 4- Promoting luxury consumer goods and patterns of luxury 5- Advertising slogans of foreign culture emblazoned on clothes 6- Posters and photos 7- Orientalist influence 8- Foreign borrowing and giving concessions to foreigners without considering the national interests of the country .(Khomeini, 2004). At the same time, there is a strong consensus among the elites that Western identity threats are aimed at destroying Iran's revolutionary discourse.

A new study on the Iranian leaders' threat perceptions point out that according to them identity threat is understood in follow ways; secularization; Vaticanization – the separation of politics from religion; Balkanization – sectarian movements; and Andalusization – corruption and depravity (Ahmadian 2015, p.p. 28-30). Vaticanization is a term refers to the separation of religion from politics, according to the Iranian elites, this process happened in Europe and church lost its power against modern nation-state, and this must be prevented from happening in Iran. Andalusization happens when the Iranian society abandons its conservative and religious values against the West.

It is believed among the current political elites that the West is persuading cultural hegemony and Trump maximum pressure campaign was aimed at abolishing Iranian territorial integrity and hurting its soft power.

The interesting point is that the Russians also feel in the same manner. The Russian 2008 foreign policy concept acknowledged that threat of civilizational competition and mentioned that “for the first time in contemporary history, global competition is acquiring civilizational dimensions which suggests competition between different value systems” (Kremlin, 2008). The terms “morality” and “spiritual” in Putin's speeches since his return to the presidency in



2012 have been used more frequently and shows the seriousness of identity threat according to Russian officials (Laruelle 2015, P. 21). Hence, both Iran and Russia share a sense of perceived Western cultural threats.

Another area Important for the pillar of Russia and Iran security convergence is regime change policies and sanctions. Regime change includes various forms of operations such as reinforcing social discontent. Both Tehran and Moscow feel threatened by regime change policies. While in the Iranian case, Tehran has long faced open threats by the United States officials to use military force, in the Russian case, it was formerly more on a covert basis. Both countries feel threatened by Western powers forceful regime change as a legitimate mechanism in the international relations to shape security architecture. They are both firmly committed to oppose it and rely on each other in this regard (Geranmayeh and Liik 2016).

Add to regime change policies, sanctions are also another threat since they block economic development and feed the potential social unrest. There is a clear link between sanctions and regime change, since the former leads to social discontent and political violence. These would pose an existential threat to both Tehran and Moscow. Iran has been facing the sanctions since the revolution in 1979, and 2017-2018 protests which also continued afterward shows how sanctions have economic costs that can lead to political instability. Following that, the Iranian officials have time and again called the sanctions as economic war against Tehran (Jahangiri, 2018).

Russia also find itself in a similar situation, where sanctions are affecting its domestic politics. Despite the Kremlin's claims that sanctions only have minimal effect on the economy, they are feeding the dissatisfaction. Iranian ambassador to Russia, Mehdi Sanayi, calls Western sanctions against Russia and Iran a common threat to both which encourages them to cooperate more closely and formulate joint policies.

In facing common threats from the United States, Iran and Russia established closer ties with regards to the war in Ukraine. Their alliance became public when the Iranian foreign minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, on 5 November 2022, acknowledged that Iran has provided Russia with drones. This acknowledgement came after initial denials. The denial came made in a phone call between Iran's Foreign Minister and his Portuguese counterpart on, following claims by Ukraine and US intelligence that Russia is using Iranian-made kamikaze drones in its attacks on Ukrainian territory. Following that, the Iranian government said its foreign minister, Amirabdollahian, emphasized that Iran "has not and will not" weapons to Russia in the Ukraine war. He said, " We believe that the arming of each side of the crisis will prolong the war, so we have not considered and do not

consider war to be the right way either in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria or Yemen’’ (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/15/europe/iran-denies-supplying-russia-weapons-ukraine-intl-hnk/index.html>).

Apart from military cooperation and assistance by Iran to Russia in war against Ukraine, both countries have decided to cooperate in order to bypass the sanctions. Both Iran and Russia have been able to bypass the U.S. sanctions as they are preparing to begin shipments of goods via the new transcontinental trade route the North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that connects Moscow with Asian and Iranian markets. The cargo deliveries via the operational trade corridor across the Caspian Sea start from the Sea of Azov and Don River in Russia through the Caspian Sea port city of Astrakhan, connecting the Iranian hubs, and finally the Indian Ocean. Both Iran and Russia have been rapidly expanding their supply chains with new routes with the first transfer of Russian goods tracing back to June. The first shipment was the Russian cargo consisting of wood laminate sheets in at least two 40-foot containers that weighed 41 tons. It departed St. Petersburg for the Caspian Sea port city of Astrakhan, Dariush Jamali, the director of a joint-owned Iranian-Russian terminal in Astrakhan had then stated. Tehran's geographical location has proven to be beneficial to bypass the sanction and transit of goods from Moscow to Asia via the trade corridor that solely runs through the Iranian territory (<https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/russia-ally-iran-bypass-western-sanction-by-establishing-new-3000km-trade-route-articleshow.html>).

The goal of this financial cooperation is to protect their economic ties from being hurried by sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies.

Iran and Russia have also decided to de-dollarize their trade with using other currencies than U.S. dollar. On Aug 24, 2022, Iran's Ambassador to Russia announced exchange of rial and rouble between Iran and Russia for the first in history to trade. He mentioned that current Iranian government which took office about a year ago, pays special attention for cooperation with its neighbors, and the Islamic Republic of Iran considers Russia to be extremely important in this manner. The emphasis was placed upon the issue of North-South Transport Corridor whose deal started in 2000. North-South Transport Corridor is a sea, rail, and road route expected to facilitate and boost exchange of goods between Iran, India, Russia, Europe, and the Central Asian states

<https://en.irna.ir/news/84864149/Iran-Russia-exchange-rial-rouble-for-the-first-time-to-trade>).

As explained above, both Iran and Russia have been facing common threats from the United States. They face threats from NATO expansion led by the United States to the east and also cultural invasion, and other forms of threats. As a result of these threats, they both decided to cooperate in the Ukraine war.

As touched upon throughout this thesis, Iran and Russia became closer together in three turning points which we went through. In the nuclear cooperation between Russia and Iran, Tehran-Washington ongoing confrontation and Iran's concern regarding U.S. threat during 1991-2012 was the most important factor in Iran-Russia convergence.

Concerning the nuclear agreement, Moscow-Washington confrontation and Russia's concern regarding growing U.S. threats played the most important factor. And at the end, in the recent case of Ukraine war, facing and coping with common threats, they decided to cooperate at military and financial level.

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