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Hamidreza Azizi

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Stop Terrorists
Stop Devils

THE UKRAINE WAR: THE VIEW FROM IRAN

*Why has Iran chosen to clandestinely have closer ties
with Russia in the Ukraine War?*

By Hamidreza Azizi

On October 10, the Ukrainian capital Kyiv and other cities came under one of the most intense waves of Russian attacks since the war began in late February. According to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Russia used dozens of missiles and Iranian-made drones, which targeted energy infrastructure and civilian centers in Kyiv. These attacks were the most alarming case of the Russians using Iranian drones in their military aggression against Ukraine.

Although Tehran officially denies providing drones to Moscow for use in the Ukraine War—or supporting the Russian invasion in general—the evidence of Iran’s indirect involvement is undeniable. In fact, hardline Iranian media, especially those affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), boast about the role of Iranian drones in the war on Ukraine describing it as an achievement. In any case, Iran’s role in supplying weapons to Russia led the Ukrainian government to expel the Iranian ambassador and downgrade relations with the Islamic Republic.

Meanwhile, despite the Iranian Foreign Ministry’s continued emphasis on “neutrality” in the Ukraine War, Iran’s official rhetoric has been shifting toward publicly supporting Russia. In a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei all but endorsed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a preventive measure. “Concerning Ukraine, if you had not taken the initiative, the other side would have done so and initiated a war,” Khamenei told Putin, according to a statement from the Iranian Supreme Leader’s office. It is safe to argue, then, that Tehran has increasingly appeared as an ally of Moscow in the Ukraine War. Iran’s position stems from ideological considerations and hostility toward the West, yet to better understand its approach, other elements must be considered, such as the Iranian leaders’ perception of transition in world politics, their geopolitical calculations, and the country’s domestic developments.

◀ Iranians living in Ukraine, protest Iran's government and deliveries of Iranian drones to Russia, Kyiv, Oct. 28, 2022.
Gleb Garanich/Reuters

Iran and the Emerging World Order

For more than four decades, the Islamic Republic has placed opposition to the United States and the U.S.-led international order at the top of its foreign policy agenda. Since November 1979, when student revolutionaries took over the American embassy in Tehran, Iran has been recognized as a revisionist state trying to target the interests of the United States—and by extension, Washington's allies in the Middle East. Successive administrations in Iran, whether moderate or hardline, have been unanimous in advocating for change in international structures and procedures, including the United Nations and its Security Council, so that they would be less Western-dominated.

Meanwhile, senior Iranian officials, including Khamenei, have in recent years increasingly spoken about the decline of America's global role, emphasizing the

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inevitability of a shift in the international system toward a non-Western order. According to this interpretation, the ongoing transition in international politics allows revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, to increase their international clout and challenge the United States. In line with this ideology, Iran can assume a more assertive role and expand its own sphere of influence.

From this perspective, the war in Ukraine and the variety of international reactions in support of it are seen as a clear sign that the unipolar order has already come to an end. Iranian leaders are following with interest how Washington is unable to convince its traditional allies in the Middle East—and other regions, except Europe—to put diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia, considering this proof of the diminishing role of U.S. leadership on the global stage. For instance, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Iranian Supreme Leader's top military adviser, sees the war in Ukraine as a sign that the “power transition from the West to the East” has begun.

According to the Iranian government's narrative, since the war in Ukraine has reached an irreversible point, especially with regards to the remapping of great power competition and politics, now is the time for Iran to develop ties with rising powers on the bilateral and multilateral levels. In other words, the March 2021 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement with China, full membership in the Russian and Chinese-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that was realized in September 2022, and military support for Moscow in the Ukraine war are all part of a single strategy to take advantage of the “emerging international order”.

Adopting Geopolitical Measures

Taking note of the decline in Washington's leadership, other regional actors, just like Iran, have tried to adjust their foreign and security policies according to the new global realities. As far as Iran's regional rivals—the traditional allies of the United States—are concerned, this adjustment has primarily taken the form of new regional alignments and security arrangements.

Iran's Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf, for example, have chosen to cooperate closely and form a security coalition with Israel with the aim of filling the void of American support and establishing a counterbalance against Iran. At the same time, Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States, has assumed a more independent and assertive role in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Turkey's role in supporting Azerbaijan in the 2020 war with Armenia over Karabakh was a case in point. Azerbaijan, another neighbor of Iran, has developed a growing political and military partnership with Iran's arch-enemy: Israel. These developments have raised Iran's threat perception toward its regional neighborhood to an unprecedented level.

To effectively deal with this increasingly threatening geopolitical environment, Iran has taken two main measures, one of which is relatively old and the other new. Over the last forty years, the main pillars of Iran's strategy to enhance its deterrence and ward off security threats have been to develop indigenous military and defense capabilities and, at the same time, create a network of armed non-state allies across the region, known as the "axis of resistance." The term often refers to the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Yemen's Houthis, and the Syrian regime.

The first pillar was a result of international arms embargoes against Iran and the impossibility of upgrading defense systems using foreign aid. The second pillar is concerned with the Islamic Republic's relative isolation and lack of state allies, which fostered its desire to work with non-state actors.

What is new, however, is Tehran's apparent and growing desire to form alliances with rising global powers, especially Russia and China. Because Iranian leaders believe that Russia and China are looking to form coalitions and allies from different regions in the world to countervail the traditional powers, Iran is looking to do the same. By abandoning the policy of "neither East nor West," which was one of the main pillars of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic is seeking to form alliances with Russia and China as part of

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its own balancing strategy against regional rivals. Furthermore, Iranian officials probably hope that in the near future, Russia will return the favor by supplying them with advanced weaponry, particularly state-of-the-art fighter jets.

Why Closer Ties with Russia?

Although different administrations in the Islamic Republic, regardless of their orientation in domestic politics, have always taken a critical stance toward the United States and the liberal international order, there have been considerable differences in how the Iranian leadership views Russia and how Tehran should regulate its relations with Moscow. Generally speaking, Iran's so-called moderate and reformist factions have taken a more cautious approach toward Russia to the extent that they are skeptical of an alliance or even a partnership with Moscow. This approach was evident in a leaked interview with the former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in April 2021, where he strongly criticized Russia's role in Iran's foreign policy, especially in the Syrian crisis and pre-2015 nuclear negotiations that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal.

On the other hand, the conservative faction close to the Supreme Leader, as well as Khamenei himself, has held a favorable view of Russia and relations with the Kremlin. In fact, during more than three decades of his leadership, Khamenei has used every opportunity to praise Russia and Putin. The current Iranian administration of President Ebrahim Raisi shares this point of view, pursuing closer ties with Moscow in the context of its "look to the East" strategy. If, in the past, the presence of the moderates in power would have caused Iran's policy to be a balancing act between the East and the West, the Iranian government as a whole is now bluntly in favor of closer ties with Moscow.

The desire for closer relations with Moscow also has to do with growing authoritarianism in Iran's domestic politics. The 2021 presidential election, in which all reformist candidates were disqualified, clearly showed how determined the Supreme Leader and his entourage were in deterring any meaningful democratic activity. Indeed, the signs of the government's authoritarian tendencies had started to appear long before, at least since 2009 and the crackdown on the Green Movement. The movement was initially a reaction to presidential election fraud, but it soon turned into a massive public uprising that challenged the whole political system. The Iranian government's increasing despotism, along with corruption and economic difficulties, were the main factors that have led to a massive protest movement in Iran since September 2022.

Meanwhile, unlike Europe, which has always been critical of the human rights situation and political and social freedoms in Iran, Russia as well as China—themselves ruled by authoritarian governments—are seen as reliable partners

for the Islamic Republic. Not only do these two states not criticize the Islamic Republic over domestic issues, but actively assist the Iranian government in establishing tighter control over its society and maintaining undemocratic practices by providing technological assistance and intelligence cooperation. Therefore, apart from foreign policy, Iranian leaders see the partnership with Russia as necessary to ensure their interests inside the country.

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Contradiction vis-à-vis Ukraine

It is not possible to understand Tehran's position vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine without understanding Iranian perception of the changing international system, the geopolitical implications of regional rivalries in the Middle East and Central Eurasia, and considerations related to Iran's domestic politics. The combination of these factors has caused Iran to effectively side with Russia in what the Iranian leaders perceive to be not just a war on Ukraine, but one against the West. However, the reason why the Iranian government still claims "neutrality" and refrains from officially supporting Moscow in the war can be found in Iran's concerns about the consequences of the Ukrainian crisis.

First and foremost, Iran's open support for Russia would mean taking sides with the aggressor. Iran, which experienced Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's war of aggression for eight years in the 1980s during the Iran–Iraq War, would have a difficult time justifying such a position. Besides, the mixed ethnic composition of Iran's border provinces to the east and west has consistently raised concerns that hostile states may manipulate ethnic and sectarian gaps to undermine its territorial integrity, just as Russia has done with Ukraine. This could become a serious challenge, especially in areas where the Kurds, Arabs, Azeris, and Baloch have the majority, i.e., in Iran's southwest, west, northwest, and southwest respectively. This is why, eight years after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Iran still does not recognize that region as part of the Russian Federation. Therefore, Iran's position toward the Ukraine War has an inherent contradiction at its core, which explains the difference between Tehran's official positions and its practical behavior.

At the societal level, the expanding partnership with Moscow has been met with a primarily negative reaction from the Iranian public, which has historically been sensitive to Russia's role in the country. Iranians recognize Russia as an aggressive power that in the 19th century, through the Golestan and Turkmanchai treaties, acquired a significant part of Iran's territories in the South Caucasus, and later, during World War II, occupied the north of Iran. As such, among other aspects, the war in Ukraine also reflects a wide gap between the priorities

of the government and those of the Iranian public. This means that Tehran–Moscow relations lack social support and infrastructure and depend heavily on the viability of the ruling regimes in both countries. Therefore, one can assume that widespread protests in Iran, which have already become a critical challenge to the Islamic Republic, have also raised concerns in the Kremlin. Any fundamental political change in Iran would most likely deprive Russia of a reliable partner in the strategic region that is the Middle East. ®