




Cite this article as: Bijan, A. (2026). Russia's Strategic Culture toward Iran in the West Asian Region. *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, 10(1), 277-317
<https://doi.org/10.22059/wsps.2025.400479.1546>

Russia's Strategic Culture toward Iran in the West Asian Region^{*}

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(Received: Aug. 18, 2025 Revised: Dec. 22, 2025 Accepted: Dec. 26, 2025)

Abstract

This study examines Russia's strategic culture in West Asia and its implications for bilateral relations with Iran from the post-Soviet period (1991) to recent developments in 2025. Employing a qualitative framework rooted in strategic culture analysis, the research demonstrates that Russia's approach toward Iran is shaped by pragmatic opportunism, historical experience, and a desire to maintain regional influence without overcommitting militarily. Findings reveal that Moscow engages with Tehran episodically, balancing cooperation against shared threats with strategic caution to preserve flexibility in relations with other regional actors, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Brief episodes such as the U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, the Syrian crisis, and the ongoing war in Ukraine illustrate how Russia mediates, condemns actions diplomatically, and selectively coordinates with Iran without offering binding security guarantees. The study identifies a persistent divergence in perceptions: Russia often views Iran as a secondary, conditional partner, whereas Tehran expects collaboration on an equal footing. Despite these differences, mutual interests in regional stability, energy cooperation, and strategic depth create occasions for tactical alignment, particularly under external pressures. Overall, the results demonstrate that the Russia–Iran relationship is conditional, adaptive, and strategically ambiguous, with cooperation shaped less by ideological convergence and more by pragmatic calculations. By situating these interactions within the framework of strategic culture, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the limits and possibilities of Russia–Iran engagement in West Asia, highlighting how historical legacies, geopolitical constraints, and contemporary crises collectively define a partnership that is influential yet inherently fragile.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, Strategic Culture, Syria, Ukraine, West Asia

^{*} The author has no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in this manuscript.

Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies | Vol. 10 | No. 1 | Winter 2026 | pp. 277-317

Web Page: <https://wsps.ut.ac.ir/> Email: wsps@ut.ac.ir

eISSN: 2588-3127

PrintISSN: 2588-3119

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1. Introduction

International relations in the twenty-first century are increasingly shaped by complex geopolitical, economic, and security dynamics, demanding nuanced and multi-layered analysis. West Asia, as a strategically vital region, has long been a focal point for great power competition, with Russia and Iran emerging as key actors whose interactions significantly influence regional dynamics. Understanding these interactions requires more than an examination of military capabilities or economic ties; it necessitates analyzing the strategic cultures that guide decision-making, risk assessment, and crisis management in both states (Gray, 2016). Strategic culture, comprising the enduring beliefs, norms, and values that shape a country's security and political behavior, provides an essential framework for interpreting patterns that might otherwise appear inconsistent. Russia's strategic culture, shaped by centuries of invasions, imperial ambitions, and periods of vulnerability, combines pragmatism, long-term calculation, and a persistent desire to maintain the status of a great-power in the world. Consequently, Moscow's approach toward Iran in West Asia is cautious and opportunistic. It engages with Tehran when cooperation aligns with broader objectives, yet avoids deep entanglement that could limit flexibility or provoke confrontation with other regional actors (Mankoff, 2016). This pragmatism is particularly evident in Russia's response to the 2025 Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. While condemning the attacks as violations of international law and threats to regional stability, Moscow refrained from providing military guarantees, emphasizing its role as mediator and preserving strategic autonomy.

Iran's strategic culture, in contrast, is informed by revolutionary ideology, historical resistance to foreign domination, and strong

emphasis on sovereignty and autonomy (Axworthy, 2013). Tehran pursues strategic depth through regional influence, proxy networks, and soft power mechanisms. Attacks on its nuclear facilities by the United States and Israel are perceived as existential threats, reinforcing Iran's expectations of support from strategic partners. However, Russia interprets these crises pragmatically, and seeks to leverage them to enhance its influence and maintain a regional balance without being drawn into direct confrontation. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has further reshaped the strategic landscape of West Asia and the Russia-Iran partnership. Confronted with severe sanctions and attrition in Ukraine, Russia has recalibrated its military and economic engagement in the Middle East, relying more on Iran-aligned forces in Syria and deepening tactical cooperation in energy, logistics, and military-technical areas. At the same time, Moscow balances its relations with other regional actors, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, ensuring that support for Iran does not undermine broader strategic objectives. The Ukraine war thus acts as both a constraint and an opportunity: it limits Russia's capacity for direct engagement, while creating conditions for selective, pragmatic collaboration with Tehran.

The intersection of Russian and Iranian strategic cultures produces a relationship that is cooperative, yet conditional. Both states share an interest in countering Western influence and promoting a multipolar regional order; but Russia's long-term, hierarchical approach contrasts with Iran's emphasis on equal partnership and ideological solidarity. These differences are evident in Syria, where military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation serves Russian interests without binding Moscow to unconditional commitments to Tehran. Russia's nuanced balancing between

Ukraine-related pressures, Iranian expectations, and regional dynamics highlights the transactional nature of their partnership (Trenin, 2016). This paper employs a qualitative approach within the framework of strategic culture to examine Russia's behavior toward Iran in West Asia. It explores the strategic cultures of both countries, their patterns of cooperation and divergence, and the implications of crises such as attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities and the Ukraine war. By doing so, it provides a nuanced understanding of the conditional, adaptive, and layered nature of Russia-Iran relations, highlighting how strategic culture informs Moscow's engagement in one of the world's most contested regions.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Iran–Russia relations increasingly emphasizes the role of strategic culture in explaining the fluidity, contradictions, and asymmetries that characterize their interactions in West Asia. Unlike earlier works that described bilateral cooperation in narrowly defined contexts, new studies highlight how deeper cultural and historical factors influence Moscow's approach toward Tehran.

Çetin and Akçapa (2024) analyze Iran–Russia relations after the Cold War, noting that alignment is largely shaped by external pressures such as Western sanctions and the U.S. presence in the region. They argue that cooperation remains contingent and lacks structural durability, reinforcing the notion of opportunism rather than strategic depth. (2024) similarly underscores incoherence in the partnership by applying a SWOT analysis: while shared opposition to Western dominance serves as a unifying factor,

asymmetrical perceptions and competition in energy markets constrain institutionalization. Both studies conclude that Moscow's pragmatism prevents a long-term strategic alliance.

Seyedi Asl and Zabardast Alamdari (2025) situate Iran–Russia cooperation within the shifting global order and Iran's 'Look East' strategy. They contend that Russia provides Tehran with political and military leverage against Western isolation, but remains selective in its commitments, seeking to preserve flexibility in its dealings with other regional actors. This resonates with Katz's (2025) influential framing of the relationship as a 'tactical alignment of convenience', still widely cited in recent debates.

Trenin (2016) stresses that Russia's regional strategy is driven by pragmatic cost-benefit logic, balancing Iran against other Middle Eastern partners. Zotova (2021) highlights mutual perceptions of Russia and Iran through an analysis of history school textbooks in both countries. The study shows that historical narratives often reproduce selective memories, stereotypes, and suspicions that shape contemporary political attitudes. These asymmetric perceptions contribute to persistent mistrust and limit the depth of strategic cooperation between the two states despite periods of political alignment. Sanikidze (2025) further argues that although sanctions and global energy shifts bring the two states closer, historical mistrust continues to restrict institutional depth. Across these studies, three common themes emerge. First, Iran–Russia relations are episodic and opportunistic, lacking the institutional mechanisms of a true strategic alliance. Second, both sides hold divergent expectations: Iran seeks equality, while Russia maintains hierarchical perceptions. Third, the contradictions and unpredictability in their cooperation can be better explained through the framework of strategic culture, which links

contemporary behavior to historical experience, values, and decision-making traditions.

The existing literature, though valuable, often isolates pragmatic calculations without fully integrating them into the broader concept of strategic culture. The present article builds on recent contributions by explicitly employing this framework to explain Russia's behavior toward Iran in West Asia. By comparing the cultural underpinnings of both states' foreign policies, the study reveals why cooperation remains tactical, asymmetric, and conditional, rather than strategic and institutionalized. Moreover, unlike works focused narrowly on Syria or energy cooperation, this research adopts a regional lens, showing how Russia calibrates its engagement with Iran alongside relations with other Middle Eastern actors and within global dynamics. This dual focus on cultural foundations and regional implications constitutes the article's primary novelty and contribution.

3. Theoretical Framework

Strategic culture constitutes a central analytical framework in understanding how states formulate defense policies, military strategies, and foreign policy orientations, as it reflects the deeper historical, cultural, institutional, and ideational factors that shape decision-making processes and behavioral patterns in the international system. Since the 1970s, with Jack Snyder's seminal work on the Soviet Union's military doctrine, scholars have sought to explain both continuity and change in states' strategic postures through the lens of strategic culture, thereby moving beyond the purely materialist and structural assumptions of realism (Snyder, 1977). Snyder demonstrated that divergent national historical

experiences, political cultures, elite worldviews, and institutional structures gave rise to distinct strategic styles, which in turn influenced approaches to nuclear competition and military planning. This insight gained renewed significance after the end of the Cold War, when the collapse of the Soviet Union and the inability of realist frameworks to foresee such a dramatic systemic transformation highlighted the need to incorporate cultural variables into the study of international security (Gray, 1981; Booth, 2005).

Strategic culture has since been employed to explain why states facing similar structural constraints often behave differently, underlining the role of identity, perception, and historically embedded ideas in shaping strategic choices. As Lantis (2006) argues, strategic culture is not simply an epiphenomenon, but an independent determinant of foreign and security policy, affecting elite interpretations of threats, the use of force, and preferred modes of cooperation. Moreover, strategic culture offers a useful corrective to ethnocentric biases by emphasizing that each society develops unique strategic traditions rooted in its collective memory, historical traumas, and normative frameworks (Booth, 1981).

The conceptual development of strategic culture is often divided into three 'generations' of scholarship. The first generation, associated with Snyder, Colin Gray, and Ken Booth, highlighted the cultural underpinnings of nuclear strategy and great power rivalry, defining strategic culture as the "ways of thinking and acting about force" derived from national experience and societal values (Gray, 1981). The second generation, influenced by constructivist scholarship, criticized the determinism of earlier approaches and reconceptualized strategic culture as socially

constructed through political discourse and conscious agency (Wendt, 1992). This perspective stressed the fluidity of cultural frameworks and their evolution over time through interaction between elites, institutions, and societies. A third generation of studies has sought to operationalize strategic culture by categorizing its sources into physical (geography, resources, technology), political (historical experience, regime type, elite beliefs), and social (religion, values, demographic patterns), and by identifying its main dimensions: objectives of the use of force, methods of warfare, institutional authorization, and modes of cooperation in security affairs (Meyer, 2005; Lantis, 2006).

In the context of West Asia, Russia's strategic culture takes on particular importance due to its historical experiences, regional ambitions, and interactions with key regional actors, especially Iran. Russia's strategic culture, shaped by centuries of geopolitical insecurity, vast territorial expanse, and historical experiences of both imperial expansion and foreign invasion, provides a particularly rich case for applying this framework. Three elements are especially salient: first, Russia perceives itself as a great power entitled to recognition and influence; second, it possesses a persistent sense of insecurity, which reinforces the need for strong leadership and robust military capabilities; and third, it maintains a tradition of projecting power beyond its borders, with relatively few normative constraints on the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy (Huminski, 2022). These features distinguish Russia's strategic culture from those of other states and explain both its assertive behavior in regions such as Eastern Europe and West Asia, and the difficulty external actors face in predicting its long-term strategic choices.

To understand Russia's strategic culture in relation to Iran, it is

essential to move beyond Western-centric analyses and engage with Russian and Iranian sources, military writings, and policy statements that reflect Moscow's long-term regional objectives. Analysts of Russian security behavior frequently note that Western interpretations often fall prey to stereotypes, overlooking the internal logics of Russian strategic thought. To understand Russia's behavior, it is necessary to engage directly with Russian military writings, doctrines, and political debates, which emphasize not only material interests but also the centrality of political will, narrative control, and the manipulation of the information domain (Huminski, 2022). Russian strategic texts reveal a continuity of thought that links contemporary strategies of alliance disruption, subversion of adversaries' domestic politics, and opportunistic diplomacy to long-standing traditions of viewing international politics as a zero-sum contest for influence.

Booth (2005) underscores that strategic culture provides a patterned way of thinking about war and peace, shaping not only how states define enemies and threats but also how they justify the authorization and scope of military action. This framework does not predetermine behavior in a deterministic sense, but sets the boundaries of plausible choices by embedding them in historical narratives and elite expectations. Gray (1981) similarly stressed that strategic culture reflects accumulated experiences and ingrained attitudes, which influence crisis behavior and doctrinal preferences. For Russia, this means that even pragmatic cost-benefit calculations are filtered through a deeply rooted worldview that emphasizes great power identity, sovereignty, and the legitimacy of force in advancing state interests.

Iran's strategic culture, by contrast, emerges from a distinct set of historical, religious, and geopolitical factors. Shaped by the

enduring influence of Shi'a ideology, repeated experiences of foreign intervention, and the legacy of imperial decline, Iran's worldview is characterized by both a sense of strategic isolation and a determination to preserve sovereignty and project influence regionally. Its final strategic objectives include maintaining national independence, achieving long-term cultural, political, and economic development, and asserting its role as a major regional power (Wilson, 2000). Thus, Iranian strategic culture is simultaneously defensive rooted in the trauma of invasion and expansive, seeking to leverage ideological solidarity and asymmetric capabilities to expand influence.

Analyzing Russia–Iran relations in West Asia through the lens of strategic culture highlights the interplay of cooperation and divergence: shared opposition to Western influence fosters episodic tactical cooperation, while asymmetries in power perception and underlying cultural differences limit the formation of a stable long-term alliance (Ожиганов, 2012). The utility of the strategic culture framework lies in its capacity to explain these contradictions: cooperation occurs not because of structural necessity alone, but because both states' cultural predispositions—Russia's opportunistic pragmatism and Iran's ideological defensiveness—align temporarily under specific circumstances. At the same time, the episodic and fragile nature of this cooperation reflects the enduring divergence in their strategic cultures, which constrains the development of a stable alliance. Ultimately, the study of strategic culture contributes not only to a deeper understanding of the Russia–Iran relationship, but also to broader debates in international security by emphasizing how history, identity, and normative frameworks condition state behavior. It highlights the importance of avoiding ethnocentric biases, of situating policy

analysis within historical context, and of recognizing that the apparent irrationality of foreign actors often reflects coherent logics rooted in different cultural traditions.

4. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on an in-depth analytical approach to understand the strategic culture of Russia and its interactions with Iran in the West Asian region. The primary goal is to identify the underlying beliefs, norms, and historical patterns that guide Russian and Iranian foreign policy and to examine how these cultural frameworks shape bilateral cooperation and divergence.

Data collection was conducted through a combination of documentary analysis and content analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included official government statements, strategic doctrines, defense and foreign policy documents, speeches by political and military leaders, and relevant interviews published in public and specialized media outlets. Secondary sources comprised scholarly articles, books, policy reports, and analytical commentaries that provide historical, geopolitical, and cultural insights into the strategic orientations of both Russia and Iran. The selection of sources was guided by the principle of relevance, credibility, and the potential to illuminate the strategic reasoning and decision-making processes of the two states. Emphasis has been placed on Russian and Iranian sources to ensure authenticity and reduce the overreliance on Western perspectives, which often carry biases against Russia.

For data analysis, the study utilized a thematic coding approach,

in which key themes and patterns were identified through careful reading, categorization, and cross-comparison of textual data. Thematic analysis is particularly suited to this research because it allows the researcher to extract recurrent motifs, behavioral tendencies, and strategic priorities embedded in official discourse and historical narratives. In addition, triangulation was employed to enhance the validity of findings by cross-verifying data across multiple sources and perspectives. This process enabled the identification of convergences and divergences in the strategic perceptions of Russia and Iran, as well as the contingencies that drive episodic cooperation or competition in West Asia. In addition, the study uses a case study approach, focusing on key regional interactions, particularly in Syria, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf, to illustrate how strategic culture manifests in practical decision-making and international engagement. These cases were selected due to their high strategic significance, the presence of both Russian and Iranian actors, and the availability of verifiable primary sources. The cases also provide an opportunity to observe the interaction between Russia's opportunistic pragmatism and Iran's ideological defensiveness, showing where cooperation emerges and where divergence persists.

The analytical framework was informed by existing theoretical literature on strategic culture, which emphasizes the interplay between historical experience, geopolitical constraints, institutional structures, and socio-cultural factors in shaping state behavior. Particular attention was given to the dimensions of military strategy, foreign policy orientation, decision-making processes, and elite perceptions, as these provide the most direct insight into the operationalization of strategic culture in state interactions. By combining a detailed contextual understanding with systematic

thematic analysis, this study was able to construct a coherent explanatory model of Russia's strategic behavior toward Iran, highlighting the pragmatic opportunism, cost-benefit calculations, and cautious balancing of regional and global interests that characterize Moscow's approach.

Overall, the methodology employed in this study ensures a rigorous and systematic exploration of Russia's strategic culture toward Iran, allowing for both descriptive richness and analytical clarity. The qualitative approach, supported by comprehensive document analysis and thematic coding, provides a robust foundation for understanding the nuanced and often ambiguous patterns of bilateral relations, while situating these findings within the broader theoretical discourse on strategic culture and international security studies.

5. West Asia in the Strategic Culture of Iran and Russia

From a geopolitical standpoint, the sustained presence of Tehran and Moscow in West Asia is not simply a reflection of power projection, but reveals deep-rooted, strategic imperatives. For both Iran and Russia, shared threats such as terrorism, the unilateralism of the United States, and persistent regional instability have created both a rationale and a need for intensified political and security cooperation. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, this cooperation has become more consequential, as each actor leverages its strengths and navigates its vulnerabilities within a fractious regional order.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia under Vladimir Putin embarked on a renewed Middle Eastern strategy

that transcends simplistic binaries of alliance and enmity. Rather than aligning solely with the West or isolating itself, Moscow has carved out a role as a mediator and power broker, engaging with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other regional actors (Popescu & Secieru, 2018). Within Russia's strategic culture, this diplomatic posture is rooted in pragmatism and a long-standing conviction of great-power status: a belief that Russia must exert influence by balancing multiple actors rather than committing unconditionally to a single bloc.

In its strategic calculations, Moscow treats Iran as an important but conditional partner: cooperation is valuable when it serves Russian interests; yet Moscow is careful not to overcommit in a way that undermines its broader regional leverage. The June-13, 2025 Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear and military facilities dramatically tested this relationship: Russia strongly condemned the attacks, labeling them an unlawful violation of international law and a threat to regional stability, while also offering to mediate between Tehran and Tel Aviv (Bartosiewicz & Menkiszak, 2025).

For Iran, the calculus in West Asia is shaped by both ideology and survival. Situated at a strategic crossroad, Tehran has pursued a foreign policy that combines resistance to perceived foreign domination with regionally assertive initiatives. Since the 1990s, Iran has deepened cooperation with Russia in energy, military, and nuclear sectors, a trend that gained momentum amid Western sanctions and containment pressures (Therme, 2018). Simultaneously, Iran's regional influence has extended through proxy alliances—most notably with Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Syria—supporting a strategy of holistic resistance rather than direct military expansion (Skjold Bang Dahl, 2018). The 2025 airstrikes represented not only a strategic threat but also a

symbolic blow to Iran's nuclear sovereignty; Moscow's vehement diplomatic reaction underscored how central Tehran remains to Russian calculations, even if Moscow stops short of full security guarantees (Khavarinejad, 2025). Nevertheless, Russia's reluctance to provide overt military support despite its public condemnation reflects a complex, layered strategic culture: one that values influence over entanglement, and leverage over formal alliance (Luzin & Roshchin, 2025).

In responding to these strikes, Moscow's diplomatic posture reflected key elements of its strategic identity. President Putin condemned the Israeli actions in calls with both Iran and Israel, accusing Israel of violating the UN Charter and warning of disastrous regional escalation. The Foreign Ministry echoed this denunciation, condemning "unprovoked military strikes against a sovereign state ... and its nuclear infrastructure" as "Categorically unacceptable" (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). At the same time, Russian officials expressed concern for the safety of Russian experts working in Iran, notably at nuclear sites such as Bushehr, and urged Israel to cease its attacks (Aktaş, 2025).

Russia framed its condemnation not only in normative terms but also through a utilitarian lens: the escalation risked undermining its global normative claims, while potentially distracting Western attention from its own strategic priorities, including its ongoing war in Ukraine. Moreover, Moscow's offer to mediate was calibrated: it reinforced Russia's role as a broker, but the absence of any military guarantee to Iran clarified the transactional nature of their partnership (Khavarinejad, 2025). On the broader regional plane, Russia's mediation efforts and diplomatic engagement in the wake of the strikes fit into a longstanding pattern in its strategic culture: the desire to be indispensable, to shape outcomes without being

locked into zero-sum alliances. The Kremlin's 2019 proposal for "Collective security in the Persian Gulf" and earlier initiatives echo this pattern, illustrating Moscow's belief that regional order is best maintained through multilateral mechanisms rather than exclusive blocs (Baklanov, 2019).

Yet, Iran's strategic autonomy remains paramount: despite welcoming Russian mediation, Tehran appears to resist any security architecture that could render it overly dependent, preserving its independence as both a symbolic and practical imperative (Grajewski, 2021). This ambivalence in Tehran's posture reflects Iran's strategic culture, in which self-reliance and ideological resistance converge with pragmatic regional engagement.

Furthermore, the Russian Iranian linkage in West Asia serves Moscow broader existential and economic purposes. The 2025 escalation generated a surge in global oil prices—a dynamic that benefits the Russian budget under sanctions (Bartosiewicz & Menkiszak, 2025). At the same time, by positioning itself as a mediator, Russia can argue for its indispensability on the global stage, presenting itself as both a restrainer of conflict and an institutional alternative to Western-led frameworks. From Tehran's vantage point, this relationship offers both opportunity and constraint. The diplomatic shield provided by Russia is valuable, but the absence of a mutual defense commitment—or any concrete military support—emphasizes that Iran cannot rely on Moscow unconditionally (Dadjoo, 2025). Iran's strategy appears to retain the features of tactical alignment: cooperation when convenient, but with caution about entrenching dependency.

In sum, the interaction of Iran's and Russia's strategic cultures in West Asia produces a relationship that is fundamentally

conditional, episodic, and transactional. While shared threats and overlapping interests bring them together, divergent long-term goals, power asymmetries, and structural mistrust impose clear limits. Russia thus retains its coveted role as a balancer and mediator, while Iran maximizes its strategic autonomy without sacrificing the benefits of partnership.

6. Dimensions of the Syrian Crisis

When examining the Syrian civil war, both Iran and Russia possessed compelling strategic reasons to provide enduring financial, military, and political support to the Assad regime. For Tehran, Syria represented not just an ideological bastion of the 'Axis of Resistance' but also a geostrategic linchpin; the survival of Bashar al-Assad's government ensured a contiguous network of allied actors stretching from Iran through Iraq to Lebanon. For Moscow, too, the intervention that began in October 2015 was not solely about preserving an ally, but about restoring its global influence, projecting power in the Eastern Mediterranean, and reasserting its role as a decisive third-party actor in Middle Eastern crises (Popescu & Secieru, 2018).

Over more than a decade, the empirical success of keeping Assad in power became itself a diplomatic victory for both countries. Yet that support came at a cost. Iran's backing deepened its estrangement from the Gulf monarchies, many of which supported opposition groups in Syria and ratcheted up sectarian tensions. Meanwhile, Russia's military involvement risked its image in the Arab world, where many viewed Moscow and Tehran as pro-regime backers detached from popular Syrian demands (Kozhanov, 2017).

Importantly, Moscow's strategic culture shaped not only how it fought in Syria but also how it framed its intervention. The Kremlin's legacy narrative that Russia intervenes to stabilize rather than to dominate rests on presenting itself as a conservative power opposing Western 'export of democracy' and external regime change. From Moscow's point of view, Western calls for Assad's departure are yet another episode of imposing liberal values on sovereign states, a familiar pattern stretching back to Libya in 2011 and Iraq in 2003 (Notte, 2016).

From Tehran's perspective, the use of Russian airpower from strategic bases—including out of Hamadan's Nojeh air base signified not only a tactical partnership, but also a broader signal: Iran was willing and able to wield power in a way that transcended its traditional 'neither-East-nor-West' posture (Qaidaari, 2016). In doing so, Tehran projected an image not just of a regional ideologue, but of a power broker capable of coordinating with a great power. For Moscow, Iran's role was indispensable to stabilizing the Assad regime; yet Iran was equally useful as a counterweight to Sunni Arab states seeking to sideline the Russian influence.

One of the most profound shifts, however, came after the fall of Assad on December 8, 2024. This event fundamentally altered the axis of relations: without Assad, Russia and Iran had to reconsider the basis of their intervention. Moscow quickly pivoted from direct military means to a combination of diplomacy, economic reconstruction, and soft power engagement (Al Jazeera, 2025). Russia began presenting itself as a mediator between Damascus's new government and other regional actors, including Tehran, rather than as a guarantor solely of Assad's rule (Cafiero, 2025). In the post-Assad era, Iran too readjusted its strategy. Without the

reliable central authority of the previous regime, and in light of increased regional and global scrutiny, Tehran leaned into soft power instruments, religious diplomacy, reconstruction of Shiite shrines (for instance, the Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab), and targeted economic investments as a means to preserve its influence in Syria (Karaeva, 2025). These moves reflect a transformation in Iran's strategic posture: from a wartime patron to a long-term partner in reconstruction.

Russia's and Iran's bilateral cooperation in Syria also evolved. Economic cooperation including participation in reconstruction projects, infrastructure development, and non-dollar trade became a vehicle for influence. Notably, the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty' signed by the two countries did not include explicit guarantees of military defense in the wake of Israeli strikes or broader regional tension; instead, Moscow adopted a cautious diplomatic line, often emphasizing mediation over confrontation (Dixon & Abbakumova, 2025).

This shift underscores a key tension in their strategic cultures. For Russia, involvement in Syria was never solely ideological; it was deeply pragmatic. Maintaining bases (e.g., Tartus, Hmeimim), leveraging economic reconstruction, and preserving diplomatic flexibility, all of which align with a Russian worldview that prizes long-term influence over transactional alliances. For Iran, while Syria was ideologically significant, Tehran's approach in the post-Assad phase reveals a more transactional and adaptable strategy: ideological goals remain, but operational tactics have shifted to reflect new realities.

Importantly, the collapse of Assad's regime also amplified a form of soft regional competition between Iran and Russia.

Reconstruction funds, infrastructure contracts, and political influence in the new Damascus government now serve as arenas for influence: both countries seek to shape Syria's future, but they are no longer unified by a single, loyal regime. This rivalry is emblematic of a broader recalibration: Moscow wants to ensure its bases and economic footholds, while Tehran wants to sustain its strategic depth without becoming overly dependent.

Moreover, the international dimension continues to shape the two countries' actions. Russia still faces sanctions and a war in Ukraine, which forces it to frame its Syria policy as part of a larger geopolitical balancing act. Iran, under renewed pressure following regional attacks including the 2023–2024 strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and global scrutiny, sees Syria reconstruction and Russian cooperation as essential to maintaining its regional posture. This strategic alignment, however, remains conditional, much dependent on circumstances rather than enshrined in unconditional alliance.

In sum, the Syrian crisis has been a crucible in which the strategic cultures of Iran and Russia have both converged and diverged. Their cooperation has proven durable, but it is no longer purely military. Instead, it reflects a mature, if cautious, partnership: Russia preserves its role as both power-broker and mediator, while Iran protects its ideological and geopolitical interests through pragmatic adaptation. The post-Assad era introduces a more complex and perhaps more fragile equilibrium, where conditional alignment may endure, but deep institutionalization remains elusive.

6. 1. The Future Prospects of Iran and Russia's Presence in Post-Assad Syria

On December 8, 2024, the Syrian Arab Republic under Bashar al-

Assad collapsed amid coordinated military campaigns by opposition groups led by Tahrir al-Sham, marking a pivotal turning point in a civil war that had persisted for over a decade. One of the central reasons for Assad's overthrow was the decision by regional and trans-regional actors, including the United States, Israel, and several Gulf monarchies, not to intervene militarily in his defense, reflecting a calculated shift in strategic priorities and signaling the erosion of the so-called 'Axis of Resistance' in its traditional form (Chubin, 2012). This is what has been demonstrated by the concept of "forward defense" in Iranian military thinking. Furthermore, the ruling Alawite structure in Syria, as non-Sunni, prevents the country from joining any regional Sunni-Arab front against Shiite Iran. Therefore, since the majority of the Syrian population is also Sunni, any alternative to the Assad political system would jeopardize Iran-Syria cooperation and strategic relations, and strengthen Sunni powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Goodarzi, 2013). With Assad gone, Iran's logistical lines to Hezbollah in Lebanon and its other militia allies were disrupted, forcing Tehran to reassess both military deployment strategies and its broader regional posture.

From Tehran's perspective, the fall of Assad necessitated a transition from hard power reliance toward a multidimensional strategy incorporating religious diplomacy, cultural projects such as the reconstruction of the Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, and targeted economic assistance (Karaeva, 2025). Although this concept has increasingly taken on geopolitical significance over the past decade, it is fundamentally an ideological one. The Islamic Republic of Iran considers Syria to be a member of the Axis of Resistance, which also includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and a number of non-state armed groups in Iraq and

Palestine (Ezzeddine & Azizi, 2022). Russia's strategic calculations in the post-Assad environment have increasingly emphasized the role of mediation and multilateral diplomacy, seeking to leverage economic tools, political influence, and non-military channels to maintain equilibrium between Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Gulf states, while simultaneously preserving its access to strategic military bases (Dixon & Abbakumova, 2025).

The fall of the Assad regime could prompt Iran to reconsider its 'forward defense' strategy. For decades, Iran has relied on an 'Axis of Resistance', including Syria and its militia allies across the region, to pressure the Israeli regime and deter attacks on Iranian soil. The goal was to keep the conflict away from Iran's borders, but Tehran would face significant logistical challenges in resupplying Hezbollah without a Syrian land bridge. With limited options, a growing number of Iranian officials have called for a revision of the country's nuclear doctrine to allow it to produce nuclear weapons. Tehran would need months or more than a year to assemble its warhead and fit it to a delivery system such as a ballistic missile. Tehran, meanwhile, faces the dual challenge of sustaining its regional influence without a cooperative Assad regime and mitigating the emerging competitive dynamics introduced by Russia's balancing strategy (Nada & Glantz, 2024).

Along with Iran, Russia has been the main backer of the Assad regime for years. Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, the Kremlin supported Assad with loans, political support, and arms shipments. In 2015, Russian support continued in a qualitative way with Russian airstrikes in September of that year, as well as its increased military role in the conflict. There are several reasons for Russia's support for Assad. First and perhaps most importantly, Russia wanted to keep Assad in power because the Kremlin

believed that this would be a blow to the United States, its allies, and its friends. For Putin, the threat of Assad's government seemed to echo the overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, which he attributed to U.S.-backed regime change in support of 'color revolutions' along the lines of Iraq or Ukraine. Thus, preventing Assad's overthrow would allow Russia to reject the U.S.-led world order and what Putin sees as its efforts to spread democracy. Second, keeping Assad in power helped the Kremlin maintain its military presence in that strategically important region (Bryanski, 2011). Even before the Syrian civil war, Russia had a long-standing military presence in Syria, with a Soviet-era naval base in Tartus. After intervening in the Syrian civil war, the Russians also built an air base at Hmeimim. These bases (and other Russian military installations in the country) became important hubs for Russian military operations or influence in West Asia and North Africa. Through them, Russia was able to support its long-standing strategic goal of extending its power beyond the Black Sea into the eastern Mediterranean. These installations became particularly important after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when Turkey invoked the Montreux Convention to prevent Russia from moving warships from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean (and vice versa). Indeed, Assad's withdrawal from Syria poses a potential threat to Moscow's goals. Simultaneously, Moscow confronted a strategic dilemma: the absence of Assad jeopardized Russia's enduring military presence, including the Soviet-era naval facility in Tartus and the Hmeimim airbase, which had been upgraded to serve as critical hubs for power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean and West Asia (Epstein, 2024). Historically, Russian strategic culture, shaped by centuries of insecurity and geopolitical calculation, emphasizes maintaining a balance of power and securing operational access to strategically significant

regions. Consequently, Russia pivoted from direct military support to a combination of multilateral diplomacy, economic reconstruction, and soft power engagement, aiming to retain influence in Syria while avoiding entanglement in a deteriorating military commitment (Al Jazeera, 2025). This approach reflects a continuity of Moscow's post-Soviet strategic culture, which prioritizes flexibility, pragmatism, and balancing between regional actors, rather than the preferences of Western-oriented elites

What is clearer, however, is the impact on Russia's credibility if Assad leaves. Assad's departure, as a key Putin ally, sends a message to other potential allies that Russia may not be able to protect their regimes while it wages its own war in Ukraine. None of these consequences are likely to have a significant impact on Putin in the near future (Filter Labs, 2024). However, these consequences demonstrate the extent to which the Kremlin is paying special attention to its national interests in terms of its global strategies, especially to challenging Western dominance to support its war against Ukraine, and indicate the growing problems the Kremlin will face in the future.

More broadly, this suggests that Putin's unilateral obsession with the war against Ukraine is leading him to sacrifice other priorities, such as restoring Russia's global influence and credibility. Assad's departure may not depend on Russian support, but it would still send the opposite message. The fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria will fundamentally change Russia's strategic culture towards Iran. Given that Assad is Iran's strategic ally in the region, his fall would undermine Iran's interests, and as a result, Russia would be forced to redefine its strategy to maintain its influence and position in the Middle East (Trenin, 2023).

In this situation, Russia may try to create a new balance by

reducing its dependence on Iran and expanding cooperation with other regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and even Israel. This approach could be part of Moscow's strategic culture to manage the post-Assad crisis and prevent a power vacuum (Frederick, 2024). The intersection of Russian and Iranian strategic cultures in post-Assad Syria is therefore characterized by both cooperation and cautious competition. While the two states continue to coordinate on economic projects, energy exchanges, and infrastructure initiatives such as the North–South Transport Corridor and Iran–Russia rail links, their military alignment has been notably reduced. Russia's reluctance to offer direct support during Israeli strikes or broader regional tensions illustrates a pragmatic recalibration in line with its strategic culture emphasizing risk mitigation, balance of power, and long-term influence preservation. For Tehran, sustaining influence requires innovative use of ideological, cultural, and economic instruments, while adapting to the constraints imposed by Moscow's mediating role.

In conclusion, post-Assad Syria presents a complex strategic landscape, where Russia and Iran must navigate interdependent yet partially divergent objectives. Moscow aims to preserve influence through soft power, multilateral diplomacy, and limited military engagement, maintaining a delicate equilibrium among competing regional actors. Tehran, in contrast, seeks to defend its ideological and strategic interests, maintaining its forward defense posture, while recalibrating reliance on Syria as a regional hub. The interplay of these strategies underscores the evolving nature of their bilateral partnership in the Middle East, reflecting both the enduring impact of historical strategic cultures and the adaptive responses necessitated by the collapse of a long-standing ally.

7. Impact of the War in Ukraine

The full-scale war initiated by Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 has had far-reaching implications for the geostrategic configuration of the Middle East, especially concerning the Russia–Iran partnership. For Moscow, the war has imposed both significant economic strains, through Western sanctions, and strategic challenges as it seeks to preserve its influence beyond Europe. Tehran, on its part, has viewed the conflict not only as an ideological confrontation aligned with its anti-Western posture, but also as an opportunity to deepen cooperation with Russia in a way that enhances its regional leverage.

In mid-2022, U.S. President Joe Biden's trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia was widely interpreted by both Tehran and Moscow as a signal that Washington aimed to reassert its presence in the Middle East (Vakil, 2022). From the Russian-Iranian perspective, the visit underscored Washington's intent to prevent the emergence of a power vacuum that could benefit non-Western actors. In response, Russia and Iran, together with Turkey, convened in Tehran under the Astana process in August 2022. There, leaders of all three countries condemned American influence, particularly in Syria, and reaffirmed the necessity of strengthening bilateral and multilateral security cooperation (Jamestown, 2022). This reaction was strategic: it was less about forming a formal military bloc and more about signaling to Washington and regional actors that Moscow and Tehran were willing to coordinate politically in the face of renewed U.S. engagement.

Moscow's willingness to accommodate Iran in its foreign policy architecture, however, remains tempered by a broader logic of strategic balancing. On July 31, 2022, a new Russian maritime doctrine was approved, which explicitly reaffirms Russia's interests

in the Persian Gulf and calls for cooperation with ‘partner and allied states’ in the maritime domain (Amwaj, 2022). Crucially, the doctrine names both Iran and Saudi Arabia, signaling Moscow’s intent to maintain relations with both sides rather than to unequivocally align with Tehran. This nuanced posture reveals a key aspect of Russia’s strategic culture: a preference for flexible, transactional partnerships over rigid alliances. Moscow’s engagement with Saudi Arabia, a historic U.S. ally, even while deepening ties with Iran, underscores its ambition to preserve a broad regional network capable of buffering the impact of Western pressure.

Economically, the war has accelerated Kremlin’s efforts to leverage energy diplomacy with Iran. Russia’s energy diplomacy post-Ukraine has increasingly incorporated Tehran as a pillar of its strategy to diversify trade routes and circumvent sanctions. Iran’s energy infrastructure and geographic position make it a valuable transit hub, especially for goods and resources traveling between Russia, the Persian Gulf, and Asia. For Moscow, this arrangement offers dual benefits: mitigating the economic cost of Western sanctions and reinforcing its regional economic influence.

Militarily, the attrition of Russian resources in Ukraine has compelled Moscow to adopt a more delegated security strategy in Syria, relying more heavily on Iran-aligned forces. Reports suggest that some Russian bases in central and eastern Syria have been transferred, or at least their control relaxed, to militias supported by Tehran and Hezbollah (Baladi & Karazi, 2024). In parallel, Iranian-backed militias have intensified their pressure on U.S. forces east of the Euphrates, while at times Russia has conducted strikes against U.S.-aligned rebel factions. This reflects a tactical coordination rather than a fully integrated military alliance: Russia

provides latitude to Iran in operational theaters that cost Moscow relatively little, while maintaining strategic influence in key areas (Baladi & Karazi, 2024). Yet, the cooperation has noticeable limits. Moscow has notably refrained from vocally backing Iranian positions when they face Israeli strikes in Syria—a restraint that underscores its dual-track strategy: support Iran up to a point, but avoid provoking Israel. This triangular balancing act is emblematic of Russia's broader regional design, where it seeks to leverage Tehran's capabilities without sacrificing its diplomatic openings to Arab states or risking escalation with Israel.

On the ideational front, anti-Americanism has resurged as a central theme in Iran–Russia cooperation, but with differing motivations. For Tehran, hostility toward the United States is deeply rooted in its revolutionary identity, while for Moscow it functions chiefly as a pragmatic strategy to contest Western hegemony. The convergence of rhetoric masks enduring divergence: Iran demands a more ideologically driven, zero-sum partnership, whereas Russia maintains a cautious, interest-based approach (Raouf, 2024). Despite signs of rapprochement, trust deficits persist within the Iranian political elite. Some Iranian analysts and policymakers express frustration with Russia's limited willingness to transfer advanced defense systems, pointing to Moscow's reluctance to fully entangle its strategic future with Tehran's ambitions (*Eghtesad Journal*, 1403 [2025 A.D.]). This skepticism reveals that, while Iran values the partnership, it continues to hedge its bets by simultaneously cultivating ties with other powers.

Technologically, Moscow has been receptive to Iranian operational know-how, especially in unmanned aerial systems. Various reports suggest that Iran's drone capabilities have been

integrated into Russian operations, offering Moscow asymmetric advantages without requiring major structural changes to its defense apparatus (MEI, 2022). Yet, despite this interest, structural constraints remain: broadened military-technical cooperation especially in areas such as missile defense faces practical and political limitations tied to sanctions and Moscow's industrial priorities.

In broader regional geopolitics, Israel exerts significant influence on Moscow's posture toward Tehran. Russia, while collaborating with Iran, remains committed to preserving strategic space in its relationship with Israel. Rather than embracing a full-blown anti-Israel alliance, Moscow pursues a more nuanced stance: it uses Tehran as a strategic counterweight to the West, yet continues to engage with Israel to prevent alienation and maintain regional flexibility. While Russia and Iran have institutionalized their cooperation—for example through a long-term strategic partnership of 20 years, formalized in early 2025—the absence of a mutual defense pledge within that agreement is telling. It suggests that Moscow is wary of overcommitment. This calculation aligns with Russia's broader war-driven strategic culture, in which security partnerships are deepened selectively and managed in the context of its global priorities (Golshiri et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has sparked conversations in Tehran about expanding its missile and air-defense capabilities, potentially leveraging Russian supplies. Such ambition, however, is constrained by economic realities: Russia itself is under enormous strain, and while it is open to transferring certain technologies, it is not prepared to provide a blank check. The partnership remains transactional, calibrated to current geopolitical pressures rather than rooted in an immutable ideological alliance. Economically, both

states face divergent incentives. Russia, under Western sanctions, seeks non-Western partners to sustain its economy; Iran, aspiring to modernize its strategic industries, hopes to benefit from Russian technology. But beyond trade and defense, the sustainability of their alignment depends on their ability to manage the inherent tensions: Iran's ideological aspirations versus Russia's pragmatism, Tehran's need for security guarantees versus Moscow's caution.

In summary, the war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for deeper tactical cooperation between Iran and Russia, but not for a seamless, permanent strategic union. Their partnership has expanded in areas critical to both energy, logistics, military-technical support, and regional influence but remains bounded by Russia's balancing act with other regional powers, its war-driven constraints, and Tehran's own hedging logic. The result is a conditional, pragmatic alliance, shaped by opportunity and restraint, not by ideological fusion.

8. Conclusion

The strategic culture of Russia in relation to Iran in West Asia provides a nuanced framework to understand Moscow's policies, decisions, and long-term objectives in the region. Unlike conventional analyses that focus solely on material capabilities, military deployments, or alliance structures, a strategic culture approach illuminates the underlying cognitive, normative, and historical lenses through which Russia perceives Iran, the region, and its own role as a global power. The interaction between Russia and Iran is thus best interpreted not as a conventional alliance but as a complex, conditional, and adaptive engagement shaped by Russia's enduring strategic culture.

Russia's strategic culture, forged over centuries of imperial expansion, foreign invasions, and geopolitical insecurity, is characterized by a persistent emphasis on flexibility, pragmatism, and the maintenance of influence without overcommitment. Moscow perceives itself as a great power with global responsibilities, yet one that must navigate a multipolar environment with caution and strategic patience. This worldview informs Russia's approach toward Iran, that Tehran is a key regional actor whose cooperation is valuable, but whose expectations of a mutual security guarantee often exceed what Russia is willing to provide. This dynamic explains Moscow's conditional responses during crises, such as the 2025 Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, where Russia condemned the attacks diplomatically while avoiding any formal military commitment. The event exemplifies a core feature of Russian strategic culture—pursuing influence, mediation, and reputation without entangling itself in open-ended obligations.

In West Asia, Russia's strategic culture prioritizes balancing multiple regional actors simultaneously. This balancing act explains Russia's dual engagement with Iran and Israel, or with Tehran and Saudi Arabia. Rather than forming exclusive alignments, Moscow seeks to position itself as an indispensable mediator, capable of shaping outcomes while preserving operational freedom. The war in Ukraine further amplified this logic that constrained resources and Western sanctions forced Russia to adopt a pragmatic, delegated security approach in Syria, relying on Iran-aligned militias for operational continuity while maintaining strategic oversight. Russia's reliance on Iran in these circumstances is less a reflection of ideological solidarity and more a calculated exercise of strategic leverage, illustrating how strategic culture mediates operational decisions under pressure.

The Syrian conflict and the subsequent collapse of the Assad regime also reveal how Russian strategic culture shapes its engagement with Iran. While Iran historically relied on Syria as a geographic and ideological corridor for influence, Russia approached the conflict with a broader lens preserving regional access, securing military bases, and maintaining multilateral influence. In the post-Assad era, Moscow's culture-driven preference for mediation over domination became evident, as Russia sought to retain strategic footholds while managing competition and potential friction with Tehran. This approach demonstrates a consistent feature of Russian strategic culture prioritizing influence, long-term presence, and risk management over unconditional support or ideological alignment. Another central dimension of Russian strategic culture is the pursuit of hierarchical yet transactional relationships. Russia views Iran as a partner whose value lies in regional influence, geographic positioning, and energy potential, rather than as an equal co-strategist in a formal alliance. Tehran, conversely, often expects reciprocity and solidarity, reflecting its own strategic culture of resistance and sovereignty protection. This mismatch produces both cooperation and tension, while Russia leverages Iran to extend influence and secure operational objectives, it retains the ability to calibrate engagement, modulate risk, and shift emphasis to other actors if circumstances demand. Strategic culture also shapes Russia's economic and technological interactions with Iran. Russia's energy diplomacy, particularly in response to the Ukraine war, illustrates a culture of pragmatism and opportunism: leveraging Iran's transit infrastructure and energy networks to mitigate sanctions and sustain economic influence. Similarly, military-technical cooperation, including selective integration of Iranian unmanned aerial systems into Russian operations, reflects

Moscow's cultural inclination to adopt practical tools that enhance capabilities without creating binding dependencies. These interactions reinforce the transactional and conditional nature of the partnership, consistent with Russian strategic culture emphasizing utility over ideology.

In sum, Russian strategic culture manifests in West Asia through a combination of pragmatism, mediation, flexibility, and hierarchical yet conditional partnerships. The relationship with Iran is a prime example. Russia engages, cooperates, and sometimes coordinates militarily, yet always within a framework shaped by long-standing cognitive and normative templates. Crises such as Israeli strikes on Iranian facilities, the collapse of the Assad regime, and the war in Ukraine illustrate that Moscow's actions are not reactive alone, but filtered through strategic cultural principles emphasizing influence, risk mitigation, and long-term positioning. Looking forward, the Russia-Iran relationship will likely continue to operate as a conditional and adaptive engagement. The durability of cooperation will depend on Russia's ability to reconcile immediate tactical needs with long-term strategic culture imperatives and on Tehran's willingness to accept Moscow's hierarchical and transactional posture. Full institutionalization of the relationship into a formal alliance remains improbable, given enduring differences in threat perception, normative frameworks, and strategic priorities. Nevertheless, practical cooperation in energy, technology, infrastructure, and regional security can serve as pillars of stable, selective engagement if embedded within clearly defined and mutually recognized frameworks.

Ultimately, a strategic culture lens clarifies that Russia's foreign policy in West Asia is not reactive opportunism, but a deeply

ingrained pattern of cognition, values, and historical experience. Russia's engagement with Iran demonstrates how culture shapes perception of threat, utility, and partnership, resulting in a relationship that is simultaneously cooperative and cautious, transactional yet enduring. By understanding these cultural underpinnings, analysts and policymakers can better anticipate the conditions under which Russia will deepen, recalibrate, or limit its engagement with Iran, and how its broader West Asian strategy will continue to evolve within the constraints and opportunities defined by its strategic culture.

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