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Iran–Russia Relations: Strategic Alliance or Interest-Based Cooperation?

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Abstract

Objective: Iran–Russia relations remain contested in Iranian foreign policy, situated between strategic partnership and interest-based cooperation. Although shared concerns over Western pressure and cooperation in regional security, energy, and multilateral institutions have strengthened strategic convergence, persistent differences over issues such as the Caspian Sea, energy competition, the JCPOA, and Russia's relations with the Persian Gulf states reveal important constraints on bilateral ties. Despite extensive scholarship on Iran–Russia relations, existing studies have predominantly emphasized geopolitical and material factors, while paying comparatively less attention to the role of identity, historical experiences, and policymakers' perceptions in shaping cooperation and disagreement.

Method: This study addresses this gap by examining Iran–Russia relations through constructivism as its primary theoretical framework, complemented by insights from cognitive diplomacy. Employing a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis and case studies, the study examines the geopolitical-security dimension through the Zangezur Corridor and the economic dimension through energy cooperation.

Results: Findings indicate that, although Iran and Russia have expanded cooperation across several strategic areas, their relationship does not constitute a comprehensive strategic alliance. Rather, it is better understood as interest-based cooperation characterized by selective convergence, pragmatic coordination, and persistent constraints arising from divergent interests, historical experiences, and differing perceptions.

Keywords: cognitive diplomacy, constructivism, interest-based cooperation, Iran, Russia, strategic alliance

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1. Introduction

Despite the significant expansion of Iran–Russia relations in recent years, particularly in regional security, energy, and multilateral diplomacy, the nature and depth of the relationship remain contested. Some scholars view growing cooperation between Tehran and Moscow as evidence of an emerging strategic partnership, whereas others interpret it primarily as a pragmatic convergence of interests shaped by changing circumstances and shared opposition to aspects of the existing international order. The distinction between strategic alliance and interest-based cooperation is therefore central to understanding both the trajectory of Iran’s foreign policy and the evolving geopolitical dynamics of Eurasia. In this study, a strategic alliance refers to a relationship characterized by enduring strategic commitments, convergence of long-term objectives, and relatively institutionalized cooperation, whereas interest-based cooperation denotes selective collaboration driven by specific and potentially changing mutual interests. The study consequently asks whether contemporary Iran–Russia relations represent a strategic alliance or a framework of interest-based cooperation.

Iran’s relations with Russia must be understood within the broader transformation of Iranian foreign policy following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Although the principle of “Neither East nor West” (Na Sharqi, Na Gharbi) initially emphasized independence from both Cold War blocs (Dorraj & Entessar, 2013), changes in the international system, growing tensions with Western powers, and extensive sanctions encouraged Tehran to strengthen relations with non-Western powers, particularly Russia and China (Azizi, 2023, p. 1). This orientation became more pronounced during the Raisi administration through the “Look to the East” policy, which

sought to diversify Iran's external relations and enhance strategic autonomy (Azizi, 2023, pp. 2–3). During his January 2022 visit to Moscow, President Ebrahim Raisi described bilateral relations as being “on the path of strategic relations”, reflecting Tehran's intention to deepen long-term cooperation with Russia (Saraswat, 2024). Iranian policymakers have likewise emphasized relations with Eastern powers as a means of reducing vulnerability to Western pressure and expanding Iran's strategic options (Clayton, 2025).

For Moscow, cooperation with Tehran has also acquired greater importance amid deteriorating relations with Western states, expanding sanctions, and intensified geopolitical competition. These conditions have encouraged coordination in regional security, energy, and multilateral diplomacy. Nevertheless, the expansion of cooperation does not necessarily demonstrate the emergence of a comprehensive strategic alliance. Iran–Russia relations have historically combined cooperation with disagreement. Differences over Russia's approach to Iran's nuclear issue, delays in the delivery of the S-300 defense system, divergent priorities in regional conflicts, and differences in strategic objectives have revealed persistent limitations in the relationship (Asadi & Monavari, 1398 [2021 A.D.], p. 182; Koolae et al., 2020; Mirfakhraei, 1403 [2023 A.D.]; Trenin, 2016). These patterns suggest that explaining Iran–Russia relations requires an approach capable of accounting for both expanding cooperation and enduring disagreement.

Existing scholarship has largely emphasized geopolitical, security, and material explanations, including regional balancing, sanctions, military cooperation, and energy relations. While these approaches explain important dimensions of bilateral interaction,

they provide comparatively less insight into how identities, historical experiences, political narratives, and policymakers' perceptions shape the boundaries of cooperation. In particular, the distinction between strategic alliance and interest-based cooperation has generally been assessed through geopolitical calculations rather than through systematic attention to the meanings and perceptions that influence state behavior.

To address this gap, the present study adopts constructivism as its primary theoretical framework and draws on cognitive diplomacy as a complementary analytical approach. Rather than viewing state interests as determined exclusively by material capabilities, this approach considers how identities, shared meanings, historical experiences, perceptions, and cognitive interpretations influence foreign-policy behavior. Integrating these perspectives makes it possible to examine not only the material incentives underlying Iran–Russia cooperation, but also the ideational and cognitive processes through which cooperation and disagreement are interpreted.

The study contributes to the literature by developing an integrated framework for assessing the nature of Iran–Russia relations beyond purely material explanations. Rather than assuming that increased cooperation necessarily signals a strategic alliance, it examines how strategic interests, historical experiences, identities, and cognitive perceptions interact to produce both convergence and disagreement. Empirically, the study focuses on two dimensions of contemporary bilateral relations: the Zangezur Corridor and energy cooperation. The Zangezur Corridor represents the geopolitical and security dimension, where regional influence, connectivity, and strategic positioning shape bilateral interactions, while energy cooperation captures the economic dimension,

encompassing both opportunities for coordination and areas of competition. Examining these two dimensions allows the study to assess how material interests and cognitive perceptions interact across distinct but interconnected areas of Iran–Russia relations.

Accordingly, the central research question is: Should contemporary Iran–Russia relations be understood as a strategic alliance or as a framework of interest-based cooperation? To address this question, the study evaluates the relationship across four analytical dimensions: the convergence of strategic objectives, the institutionalization of cooperation, the durability of bilateral commitments, and the role of cognitive perceptions in foreign-policy decision-making. It argues that although Iran and Russia have expanded cooperation across political, security, and economic domains, differences in long-term strategic objectives, historical experiences, and policymakers' perceptions constrain the transformation of their relationship into a comprehensive strategic alliance. Iran–Russia relations are therefore better understood as interest-based cooperation characterized by selective convergence, pragmatic coordination, and the continuous management of disagreement. By integrating constructivism with cognitive diplomacy, the study explains both the factors that facilitate cooperation and the constraints that limit the emergence of a fully institutionalized strategic partnership.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Constructivism and Cognitive Diplomacy

1.1.1. Constructivism and the Social Construction of State Interests

Constructivism emerged as one of the most influential approaches in International Relations during the 1990s, particularly through the

work of Alexander Wendt. In contrast to materialist approaches that emphasize the distribution of power and material capabilities, constructivism argues that international politics is shaped by shared meanings, identities, norms, and social interactions. Wendt's central proposition, "anarchy is what states make of it," emphasizes that the international system does not inherently produce conflict or cooperation; rather, the meaning of anarchy is constructed through interactions among states and the identities they develop over time (Wendt, 1992, pp. 394–399).

From a constructivist perspective, state interests are not fixed or predetermined, but are socially constructed through historical experiences, collective identities, and shared understandings. International norms similarly influence foreign-policy behavior by establishing standards of appropriate conduct and shaping how states perceive themselves and others (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 887–891). Foreign policy, therefore, cannot be fully explained by material interests alone, since states interpret their interests and strategic environments through socially constructed meanings and identities (Wendt, 1999, pp. 24–27, 224–233).

Applied to Iran–Russia relations, constructivism provides a framework for examining how historical memories, national identity narratives, political discourses, and shared interpretations of international order influence patterns of cooperation and disagreement. In this study, particular attention is given to four interconnected dimensions: historical experience, identity narratives, perceptions of strategic partnership, and understandings of regional order. These dimensions help explain why Iran and Russia cooperate in some areas, while maintaining limitations and mistrust in others. Although both states share concerns about Western influence and aspects of the existing international order,

their different historical experiences and interpretations of strategic interests can affect the depth and durability of bilateral cooperation.

Constructivism, however, primarily explains how identities, norms, and shared meanings shape the broader social environment within which foreign policy develops. It provides less direct attention to how individual policymakers interpret these meanings and translate them into specific policy decisions. To address this actor-level dimension, the study complements constructivism with a cognitive approach to foreign-policy analysis.

1. 1. 2. Cognitive Diplomacy and the Interpretation of Foreign Policy

Cognitive diplomacy, as conceptualized in this study, draws on cognitive approaches within Foreign Policy Analysis to examine how decision-makers' perceptions, belief systems, and interpretive frameworks influence diplomatic behavior. Rather than assuming that states respond directly to objective international realities, cognitive approaches emphasize that policymakers interpret external environments through mental frameworks shaped by previous experiences, beliefs, expectations, and perceptions.

The relationship between constructivist and cognitive approaches lies in their ability to connect social structures with individual decision-making. While constructivism explains how identities, norms, and shared meanings are socially produced, cognitive approaches examine how political actors perceive, interpret, and operationalize these meanings in foreign-policy decisions. As Flanik (2011) suggests, these approaches can provide complementary explanations at different levels of foreign-policy analysis.

A central foundation of the cognitive perspective is Robert Jervis's analysis of perception and misperception in international politics. Jervis (1976, pp. 70–85) demonstrates that leaders do not necessarily respond to international developments objectively; instead, they interpret information through existing belief systems and cognitive frameworks. His distinction between the deterrence and spiral models illustrates how similar actions may be interpreted differently by political actors, potentially producing mistrust, miscalculation, and unintended escalation (Jervis, 1976, pp. 58–113).

Applied to Iran–Russia relations, cognitive analysis helps explain how policymakers in Tehran and Moscow interpret each other's intentions, historical experiences, and the meaning attached to concepts such as “strategic partnership” and “cooperation”. Although the two governments may share perceptions of certain international developments, differences in historical memory, threat perception, expectations, and interpretations of strategic interests can influence the scope and limitations of their cooperation.

Building on these two perspectives, the study develops an integrated analytical framework that connects structural and actor-level explanations. Constructivism is used to examine how identities, historical experiences, narratives, and shared meanings shape the broader context of Iran–Russia relations, while cognitive analysis focuses on how policymakers interpret these factors and incorporate them into foreign-policy decisions. The empirical analysis therefore examines four interconnected dimensions, identity, perception, historical experience, and strategic interests, to assess whether bilateral cooperation reflects deeper shared understandings and long-term strategic alignment or remains primarily a pragmatic response to converging interests. This

framework enables the study to explain why Iran and Russia have expanded cooperation in several domains, while continuing to face constraints that limit the emergence of a fully institutionalized strategic alliance.

1. 2. Literature Review

The literature on Iran–Russia relations has developed along three broad analytical trajectories: geopolitical and realist explanations, debates over the nature of bilateral cooperation, and more recent approaches emphasizing identity, perceptions, ideational factors, and strategic narratives. Earlier scholarship primarily explained Tehran–Moscow relations through material interests, security calculations, regional competition, and strategic objectives. More recent studies, particularly following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have reassessed the relationship in light of sanctions, shifting international alignments, and intensified strategic interaction. At the same time, scholars have increasingly questioned whether expanding cooperation necessarily constitutes a strategic partnership. The literature therefore reflects an enduring debate over whether Iran–Russia relations are primarily a pragmatic convergence of interests or a relationship also shaped by identities, perceptions, and strategic narratives.

1. 2. 1. Geopolitical Explanations and the Debate over Strategic Partnership

A substantial body of scholarship explains Iran–Russia relations through realist and geopolitical perspectives, emphasizing material interests, security calculations, and changes in the international distribution of power. Kozhanov (2012, 2015, 2018) argues that

Russia's engagement with regional actors, including Iran, is primarily driven by geopolitical calculations and the pursuit of strategic influence rather than ideological alignment. Katz (2018) similarly highlights the coexistence of strategic convergence and differences in Iranian and Russian regional priorities, while Parker (2019) demonstrates that military and security cooperation in Syria has coexisted with competition and divergent interests.

Recent research reinforces these arguments in the post-2022 environment. Ataş (2023) argues that the Ukraine war created new opportunities for Iranian–Russian rapprochement, while simultaneously exposing constraints on the development of a durable strategic relationship. Mahmoudian (2023) likewise identifies the war as a turning point that altered the strategic environment and increased incentives for Tehran and Moscow to coordinate in response to Western pressure. Czulda (2025) further emphasizes political pragmatism and national interests in explaining Iran's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that Tehran's alignment with Moscow is better understood through strategic calculations than ideological or religious commitment.

A related body of scholarship questions the nature and durability of this cooperation. Jafari and Zolfaghari (2013) identify optimistic, pessimistic, and interest-based interpretations of the relationship and demonstrate the coexistence of cooperation and conflict. Norouzi and Roumi (1393 [2014 A.D.]) argue that its strategic character should be assessed through long-term interests rather than short-term diplomatic interactions, while Tavakoli and Mahmoudoghli (1402 [2023 A.D.]) identify structural limitations, divergent priorities, and vulnerabilities that constrain sustained strategic cooperation.

Recent studies have addressed the distinction between cooperation and alliance more explicitly. Omid (2022) argues that despite substantial convergence on several international issues, Iran–Russia relations have not developed into a full strategic alliance. Karami (2022) similarly emphasizes the uneven character of bilateral cooperation, noting that political coordination has expanded, while economic and technical-military cooperation has remained less consistent. Margojev et al., (2024) further distinguish between Iran’s increasingly pro-Russian orientation and Russia’s broader strategic interests, questioning whether political alignment necessarily constitutes a comprehensive strategic partnership.

The debate has gained further significance following the signing of the Iran–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in January 2025. Although the agreement strengthened the institutional framework of bilateral relations, it does not establish a conventional mutual-defense obligation. Thus, the formalization of strategic partnership does not necessarily resolve the conceptual question of whether the relationship constitutes a full strategic alliance.

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that material and geopolitical considerations remain central to understanding Iran–Russia cooperation. Nevertheless, these approaches provide comparatively less insight into how political actors interpret international developments, construct perceptions of common threats, and attach particular meanings to bilateral cooperation. This limitation opens space for approaches that incorporate ideational and perceptual dimensions.

1. 2. 2. Ideational Perspectives and Research Gap

Recent scholarship has increasingly incorporated identity, perception, and ideational factors into analyses of Iranian foreign policy. Shadunts (2023), drawing on ontological security, demonstrates the importance of identity, self-understanding, and othering in Iranian foreign policy. Arghavani Pirsalami, Moradi, and Alipour (2024) similarly show that tensions may emerge between Iran's constructed identity and its foreign-policy practices, identifying relations with Russia as one context in which such tensions become visible. They further argue that the strengthening of anti-Westernism as a dominant identity discourse can marginalize other dimensions of Iran's foreign-policy identity.

Cingöz and Özkan (2024) extend this perspective through an ontological-security analysis of Iran's Axis of Resistance, emphasizing identity politics, legitimacy, emotional motives, and the meanings attached to Iran's resistance-oriented foreign policy. More directly related to Iran–Russia relations, Kızılyurt (2025) demonstrates that Iran's response to the Ukraine war cannot be explained solely through systemic pressures or material interests. Ideational factors and domestic political interpretations shape how the conflict is understood, with conservative actors frequently framing the war as a struggle between Western and anti-Western blocs. These interpretations influence perceptions of risk and opportunity and help explain Iran's alignment with Russia.

Bazoobandi (2026) provides a further contribution by examining how Iranian strategic thinkers conceptualize the “Look East” policy toward China and Russia. Based on thematic analysis of approximately 70 documents produced by Iranian state, advisory, and academic institutions between 2015 and 2025, the study identifies a strategic narrative combining economic imperatives,

security considerations, power projection, defensive deterrence, and aspirations for a multipolar international order. Importantly, it also demonstrates that Iranian strategic thinking recognizes both the opportunities and limitations of partnerships with Russia and China.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the growing importance of identity, perceptions, narratives, and ideational factors in explaining Iranian foreign-policy behavior. However, most examine these factors in relation to specific issues—such as the Ukraine war, sanctions, the Axis of Resistance, or the Look East policy—rather than systematically examining how they shape the broader meaning and durability of Iran–Russia cooperation. Moreover, the relationship between constructivist explanations of identity and cognitive approaches to foreign-policy decision-making remains insufficiently developed in the specific context of Tehran–Moscow relations.

Three related gaps therefore remain. First, material and geopolitical explanations continue to dominate the literature, while ideational factors have not yet been sufficiently integrated into broader explanations of Iran–Russia relations. Second, scholarship on strategic partnership has largely focused on institutional arrangements and material convergence, with comparatively less attention to how perceptions, identities, and strategic narratives shape the interpretation and expected durability of cooperation. Third, although recent constructivist, ontological-security, and cognitive studies have highlighted the importance of identity and interpretation in Iranian foreign policy, these perspectives have rarely been integrated systematically to explain the broader trajectory of Iran–Russia relations.

To address these gaps, the present study combines a constructivist perspective with insights from cognitive foreign-policy analysis. Rather than treating Iran–Russia relations as either a straightforward strategic alliance or a purely interest-based partnership, it examines how material interests interact with perceptions, identities, historical experiences, and strategic narratives. This approach moves beyond the question of why Iran and Russia cooperate to examine how the meaning of their cooperation is constructed and interpreted. The study therefore seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation of both the foundations and the limitations of Iran–Russia cooperation.

1. 3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design based on qualitative content analysis to examine the nature of Iran–Russia relations through the complementary perspectives of constructivism and cognitive foreign-policy analysis. Because the study seeks to explain not only observable patterns of cooperation but also the identities, perceptions, historical experiences, and strategic narratives that shape bilateral relations, a qualitative approach is appropriate for interpreting the meanings embedded in official and analytical texts.

The empirical data consist of three categories of documentary sources: (1) official statements, speeches, policy documents, and diplomatic materials issued by Iranian and Russian governmental institutions; (2) bilateral agreements and other documents addressing political, economic, security, and regional cooperation; and (3) peer-reviewed academic publications, books, and policy reports produced by reputable national and international research

institutions. The unit of analysis is the official and analytical narrative concerning the nature, development, and limitations of Iran–Russia relations.

Documents were selected according to three criteria: relevance to the research question, significance for representing official or analytical perspectives, and publication between 2000 and 2025. This period captures major developments in contemporary Iran–Russia relations, including changes in the post-9/11 international environment, the Syrian conflict, the intensification of Western sanctions, the implementation and subsequent challenges of the JCPOA, and the expansion of bilateral political, economic, and security cooperation.

The analysis followed a thematic qualitative content-analysis procedure. Relevant documents were reviewed to identify recurring themes, arguments, and narratives, which were then coded according to four analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: identity, perception, historical experience, and strategic interests. Identity-related codes captured political narratives, shared values, and representations of Iran’s and Russia’s international roles. Perception-related codes focused on interpretations of external threats, Western influence, and the international order. Historical-experience codes addressed the influence of past interactions, historical memories, and previous patterns of cooperation and disagreement. Strategic-interest codes captured material and geopolitical considerations, including regional security, energy relations, economic cooperation, connectivity, and broader strategic calculations.

The coded material was then interpreted through the integrated framework of constructivism and cognitive foreign-policy analysis.

Constructivism provides the basis for examining how identities, norms, historical experiences, and shared meanings shape the broader context in which state interests are constructed. Cognitive analysis complements this perspective by examining how policymakers interpret international developments, perceive threats and opportunities, and translate these interpretations into foreign-policy decisions. The integration of these perspectives enables the study to assess whether Iran–Russia cooperation reflects primarily converging strategic interests or whether it is also sustained by shared identities, narratives, and perceptions.

To enhance methodological rigor, the study employs source triangulation by comparing official documents with academic studies and policy reports representing different perspectives. Analytical consistency was further strengthened by deriving the coding categories directly from the theoretical framework and applying them systematically across the selected materials. This procedure establishes coherence between the research question, source selection, coding process, and interpretation of the findings.

2. Findings

The analysis of Iran–Russia relations reveals a pattern of selective cooperation accompanied by persistent geopolitical and security divergences. Although Tehran and Moscow share concerns regarding Western influence and cooperate in several regional and international arenas, their interpretations of regional order, strategic priorities, and the intentions of each other frequently diverge. The following cases illustrate these limitations across key dimensions of bilateral relations.

2. 1. Geopolitical and Security Divergences

The analysis of Iran–Russia relations reveals a pattern of selective cooperation accompanied by persistent geopolitical and security divergences. Although Tehran and Moscow share concerns regarding Western influence and cooperate in several regional and international arenas, their interpretations of regional order, strategic priorities, and each other’s intentions frequently diverge.

The Zangezur Corridor represents a significant case for evaluating the nature of Iran–Russia relations because it reveals both geopolitical convergence and divergent strategic perceptions. Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement proposed the establishment of a transport route connecting Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan through Armenia’s Syunik Province under Russian supervision (Rashidi, 1402 [2023 A.D.], pp. 35–36). Although Tehran and Moscow share concerns regarding Western influence in the South Caucasus, they interpret the strategic implications of the corridor differently. Iran views the project as potentially affecting its regional connectivity and strategic autonomy, particularly by strengthening Turkish influence, weakening its access to Armenia, reducing its role in the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and creating opportunities for greater involvement by extra-regional actors, including Israel and Western security institutions (Koolae & Rashidi, 2024, pp. 3–5). Russia, by contrast, has approached the corridor primarily through regional influence and strategic management, viewing it as an opportunity to preserve leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan and maintain its position as a central security actor in the South Caucasus (Stronski, 2021). Iranian perceptions of the corridor are themselves not uniform: while some policymakers regard it primarily as a geopolitical challenge, others

emphasize its economic and transit potential (Center for Scientific Research and Strategic Studies of the Middle East, 2021). The case therefore demonstrates that shared narratives of multipolarity and resistance to Western influence have not produced identical understandings of regional order. From a constructivist and cognitive perspective, the divergent meanings attached to connectivity, security, and strategic autonomy help explain why cooperation remains selective rather than developing into a comprehensive alliance.

The dispute over Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb further illustrates the limits of strategic trust. Iran considers the islands an inseparable part of its territory, while the United Arab Emirates continues to challenge Iranian sovereignty. In 2023, Russia supported statements within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab–Russian Cooperation Forum that called for negotiations or international legal mechanisms concerning the dispute (Roomi & Aleghafur, 1402 [2023 A.D.], p. 48; Iranian Diplomacy, 2024). From Tehran’s perspective, this position represented a significant departure from the expected behavior of a strategic partner on an issue directly connected to national sovereignty. Russia’s approach suggests that Moscow may prioritize broader regional relationships and diplomatic flexibility when its interests diverge from those of Tehran. The case therefore highlights the absence of a fully shared strategic identity: sovereignty and territorial integrity carry strong identity-based significance for Iran, whereas Russia has approached the issue primarily through pragmatic regional diplomacy. The contrasting interpretations of the dispute reinforce the argument that bilateral cooperation does not rest on unconditional strategic commitments.

Russia’s relations with Israel provide another indication of this

divergence. Moscow has maintained diplomatic and security engagement with Israel while simultaneously expanding cooperation with Iran, reflecting its broader strategy of preserving regional influence and strategic flexibility (Monem, 1403 [2024 A.D.], pp. 228–230). Russia's balancing approach has included security coordination with Israel in Syria, selective military cooperation with Iran, and continued diplomatic engagement with both sides (Krasna, 1397 [2018 A.D.], pp. 102, 106, 108). From Iran's perspective, Israel constitutes a major security threat, and opposition to Israel forms an important component of its regional identity. Russia, however, treats Israel primarily as an important regional actor with whom pragmatic engagement can advance Russian interests. Consequently, Iranian policymakers may interpret Moscow's relations with Israel as evidence of limited commitment to Iran's security concerns, whereas Russian decision-makers view engagement with both states as a means of preserving flexibility and maximizing regional influence. This difference in threat perception further limits the possibility of an exclusive strategic partnership.

The Syrian conflict provides an even clearer example of cooperation combined with divergent strategic objectives. Tehran and Moscow supported the survival of Bashar al-Assad's government and shared an interest in preventing regime collapse, but their underlying motivations differed. Russia's 2015 intervention was primarily aimed at restoring its status as a major power, expanding its Middle Eastern influence, and challenging what Moscow perceived as excessive Western dominance (Krasna, 1397 [2018 A.D.], pp. 104–105). Iran, in contrast, viewed Syria through the framework of the Axis of Resistance and considered support for Assad central to its regional security strategy against

Israel and the United States. Russia's more pragmatic approach enabled it to maintain relations with Turkey and Israel while cooperating with Iran (Chowdhury, 2024, pp. 2–3). The Astana process and Russia's military arrangements with Israel further demonstrated Moscow's preference for strategic autonomy rather than exclusive alignment with Tehran. Thus, although the Syrian conflict produced substantial operational cooperation, the two states attached different meanings to Syria's strategic importance: Iran regarded it as a core element of its regional security network, whereas Russia viewed it primarily as a platform for power projection and geopolitical influence.

The Caspian Sea represents another area in which shared concerns coexist with divergent interests. Both Iran and Russia emphasize regional cooperation and oppose excessive involvement by extra-regional powers, yet their approaches have differed concerning the legal status of the sea, resource distribution, and security arrangements. Historical experiences have shaped Iran's perception of the Caspian order. The Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) weakened Iran's position vis-à-vis Russia, while the 1921 Treaty of Friendship with Soviet Russia restored Iranian navigation rights and altered the previous balance (Tiztak & Ahmadi, 1401 [2022 A.D.], p. 100; Iranian Geopolitical Association, 2022). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, disputes over maritime boundaries, resource allocation, and the legal framework of the Caspian intensified (Zimnitskaya & von Geldern, 2011). Iran supported principles of equal division and common ownership among the five littoral states, whereas Russia increasingly pursued bilateral and trilateral arrangements with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan that strengthened its influence over regional energy and maritime affairs (Balazadeh & Ghaibi, 1390 [2011 A.D.], p. 43).

The Caspian case therefore demonstrates that even where Tehran and Moscow share concerns over external influence, they do not necessarily possess a unified strategic vision regarding regional governance and resource distribution.

Iran–Russia disagreements have also become visible in the nuclear and military dimensions of bilateral relations. Russia’s role in the negotiations that produced the 2015 JCPOA reflected a combination of cooperation and strategic calculation. Although Moscow supported the negotiations, its approach was influenced by broader relations with Western powers, regional security considerations, and its interest in maintaining influence in the Middle East. Some Iranian officials and analysts have therefore interpreted Russia’s support as conditional rather than unconditional (Iranian Diplomacy, 2021). The post-2022 environment further complicated this relationship. Russia’s confrontation with the West and its growing economic dependence on alternative markets altered the strategic context of Iran’s nuclear diplomacy. At the same time, the expansion of Iranian–Russian cooperation, including allegations concerning Iranian drone transfers to Russia, contributed to additional international pressure on Tehran and affected the broader diplomatic environment surrounding the nuclear issue (Roomi & Aleghafur, 1402 [2024 A.D.], pp. 45–47; European Council, 2024; Geranmayeh & Grajewski, 2023). Competition in energy markets further complicated the relationship, as Russia’s discounted energy exports constrained Iran’s competitiveness in important markets, particularly China, even as Iranian oil production increased after 2022 (Czulda, 2025, pp. 268–269). These developments indicate that Moscow’s policy toward Tehran has been shaped not only by shared opposition to Western pressure but also by economic and geopolitical competition.

Military cooperation reveals a similar pattern. Although Iran and Russia have expanded defense and security cooperation, the implementation of some agreements has been delayed or incomplete. The most prominent example was Russia's delay in delivering the S-300 missile system, which occurred amid international disputes over Iran's nuclear program and Moscow's relations with Western powers. Russia's suspension of the contract and its support for some UN sanctions resolutions were interpreted by Iranian observers as evidence that Moscow adjusted its policy toward Tehran according to broader diplomatic interests (Asadi & Monavari, 1398 [2021 A.D.], pp. 195–196). At the same time, these developments do not indicate a complete rejection of cooperation. Rather, they demonstrate that Russian policy toward Iran has consistently been conditioned by broader relations with the West, economic considerations, and regional security priorities. The subsequent expansion of cooperation in Syria and other security domains confirms that Moscow and Tehran are capable of substantial strategic coordination while retaining independent policy choices.

Taken together, these cases reveal a consistent pattern of cooperation without comprehensive strategic alignment. Iran and Russia cooperate when their interests converge, particularly in resisting Western pressure, managing regional conflicts, and strengthening their positions in a changing international order. However, their differences over regional connectivity, sovereignty, relations with Israel, Syria, the Caspian Sea, nuclear diplomacy, and military commitments demonstrate that this convergence does not constitute a fully shared strategic identity or binding alliance. From the combined constructivist and cognitive perspective, these divergences cannot be explained solely by differences in material

interests. Historical experiences, national identities, perceptions of threat, and interpretations of the other side's intentions also shape the boundaries of cooperation. The geopolitical and security dimension therefore supports the argument that Iran–Russia relations are better understood as interest-based cooperation characterized by selective convergence, pragmatic coordination, and managed disagreement rather than as a comprehensive strategic alliance.

Russia's positions toward Iran in international and multilateral institutions provide further evidence of the selective nature of bilateral cooperation. Moscow has generally sought to balance its relations with Tehran against broader geopolitical interests, including maintaining its international position, preserving the credibility of the global non-proliferation regime, and protecting its regional influence. This pattern suggests that Russia's institutional behavior has been guided primarily by pragmatic calculations rather than unconditional alliance commitments.

Between 2006 and 2010, the United Nations Security Council adopted six resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program. Despite its permanent membership and veto power, Russia supported all six resolutions and did not use its veto to block the sanctions framework. Although Moscow sought to modify or limit some provisions, particularly those contained in Resolutions 1737 and 1929, it ultimately accepted the sanctions as part of broader international negotiations (United Nations Digital Library). Russia's position demonstrates that its approach toward Iran was shaped by diplomatic balancing rather than unconditional political alignment. During negotiations over Resolution 1929, Moscow engaged in broader geopolitical bargaining with major powers, indicating that the Iranian nuclear issue was considered within the

context of Russia's wider international interests rather than solely through the framework of its relations with Tehran (The Washington Post, 2010). Thus, although Russia opposed excessive pressure on Iran and attempted to influence the scope of sanctions, it ultimately prioritized broader diplomatic considerations over complete alignment with Tehran.

A similar pattern was evident in Russia's conduct within the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and other multilateral institutions. Moscow generally recognized Iran's right to peaceful nuclear activities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty while simultaneously supporting IAEA verification mechanisms and encouraging Iranian cooperation with international inspections. Russia opposed military confrontation and favored diplomatic solutions, but it also supported measures expressing concern over Iran's nuclear activities. Its participation in the P5+1 negotiations and support for the JCPOA reflected this dual approach. Moscow's support for the agreement was motivated not only by its relations with Iran but also by broader objectives, including preventing nuclear proliferation, maintaining influence in Middle Eastern diplomacy, and reinforcing its international role.

From a constructivist and cognitive perspective, Russia's conduct in international institutions is significant because it reflects different interpretations of the meaning and limits of bilateral partnership. Iranian policymakers may interpret Russia's support for international measures against Tehran as evidence of limited commitment, whereas Russian decision-makers may view such policies as necessary for preserving international legitimacy, diplomatic flexibility, and strategic autonomy. Consequently, Russia's behavior in multilateral institutions demonstrates that shared opposition to aspects of the Western-led order does not

eliminate differences in strategic priorities. These cases therefore reinforce the broader finding that Iran–Russia relations are characterized by selective convergence and pragmatic coordination rather than unconditional alignment or a comprehensive strategic alliance.

2. 2. Economic and Energy Relations: Cooperation and Competition

Economic and energy relations constitute another important dimension of Iran–Russia relations in which cooperation and competition coexist. Although both countries have sought to expand bilateral economic ties, the scale and depth of economic interaction remain constrained by their broader strategic priorities. Russia’s economic relations have traditionally been concentrated on Europe and the Asia–Pacific region, while the Middle East has occupied a comparatively secondary position. Although Western sanctions have increased the strategic importance of Iran, bilateral trade remains limited compared to Russia’s economic relations with other regional actors. Russia’s trade with Arab countries has been estimated at approximately \$20 billion, whereas trade with Iran has remained around \$4 billion annually (Roomi & Aleghafur, 1402 [2024 A.D.], p. 48). These figures indicate that despite political rapprochement, bilateral economic relations have not developed into deep economic interdependence.

The energy sector illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Before the Ukraine crisis, Russia maintained a dominant position in European gas markets, while Iran possessed substantial energy potential but faced sanctions, insufficient investment, infrastructure limitations, and restricted export capacity. Iran’s limited position in European energy markets therefore cannot be attributed solely to

Russian policies. Nevertheless, overlapping interests have generated perceptions of competition. Iranian policymakers have sometimes interpreted Moscow's cautious approach toward the expansion of Iranian energy exports as an attempt to protect Russia's market position, while Russian policymakers have viewed Iran simultaneously as a partner in resisting Western pressure and as a potential competitor in international energy markets. Regardless of whether these perceptions accurately reflect the intentions of the other side, they influence expectations and strategic calculations and therefore affect the depth of economic cooperation.

The Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant provides a complementary example of cooperation under structural constraints. The project represents one of the most significant instances of long-term technical cooperation between Iran and Russia. Although it was eventually completed, its implementation involved delays, increased costs, and technical difficulties. Some Iranian analysts interpreted these delays as evidence of Russia's limited reliability or an attempt to maintain political leverage over Tehran (Mashreq, 2012; Iranian Diplomacy, 2010). Other explanations, however, emphasize structural factors, including the complexity of completing a project originally designed by German contractors, international sanctions, technology-transfer restrictions, financial disputes, and regulatory requirements. The importance of Bushehr therefore lies not only in the material outcome of the project but also in its effect on mutual perceptions. Iranian policymakers could interpret delays as evidence of unreliable partnership, while Russian actors could understand them through legal, technical, non-proliferation, and geopolitical constraints.

Taken together, the economic and energy dimension

demonstrates that Iran–Russia relations have generated meaningful opportunities for cooperation without producing comprehensive economic interdependence. Shared interests in resisting sanctions and expanding economic exchanges have encouraged coordination, but overlapping interests in energy markets, different expectations, and structural constraints have limited the depth of cooperation. From a constructivist and cognitive perspective, these limitations are reinforced by differing interpretations of the other side’s intentions and reliability. Thus, economic relations, like geopolitical relations, are better characterized by selective cooperation, pragmatic coordination, and managed competition than by comprehensive strategic partnership.

3. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Iran–Russia relations are better understood as an interest-based partnership than as a comprehensive strategic alliance. Although bilateral cooperation has expanded across political, security, geopolitical, economic, and military domains, it remains selective, conditional, and sensitive to changing regional and international circumstances. Cooperation has therefore developed primarily where the strategic interests of Tehran and Moscow converge, particularly in response to Western pressure, regional instability, and changing patterns of international power. At the same time, disagreements over regional security, the Caspian Sea, relations with Israel and the Gulf states, the nuclear issue, and economic competition demonstrate that shared interests have not produced a common strategic orientation.

3. 1. Strategic Culture, Perceptions, and the Limits of Cooperation

The findings suggest that the limitations of Iran–Russia cooperation cannot be explained solely through material interests or geopolitical calculations. Constructivism and Cognitive Diplomacy provide complementary explanations for why cooperation has expanded without developing into a durable alliance. From a constructivist perspective, states interpret their interests through historically formed identities, narratives, and understandings of international order. Cognitive approaches, in turn, help explain how policymakers interpret these structures and translate them into foreign-policy decisions.

Russia's strategic culture places considerable emphasis on strategic autonomy, flexibility, and the preservation of independent decision-making. As a major power and successor to the Soviet Union, Moscow has sought to maintain influence across different regions while avoiding commitments that could significantly restrict its freedom of action. This helps explain why Russia can simultaneously cooperate with Iran, maintain relations with Israel and Gulf states, and pursue independent policies in Syria, the South Caucasus, and international institutions. The empirical findings—including selective support for Iran in multilateral institutions, conditional regional cooperation, and the uneven implementation of some bilateral commitments suggest that Moscow views Iran as an important regional partner but not as an indispensable ally.

Iran's perceptions are shaped by a different historical and strategic experience. Foreign intervention, sanctions, and prolonged confrontation with Western powers have contributed to an understanding of cooperation with Russia as a means of strengthening strategic autonomy and reducing vulnerability to Western pressure. Consequently, Tehran may attach greater

political and strategic expectations to its relationship with Moscow than Russia is prepared to fulfill. This asymmetry is particularly visible when Moscow adopts positions that Iran interprets as insufficiently supportive of its core interests, such as its relations with Israel and Gulf states or its positions on certain regional disputes.

The findings therefore indicate that the central constraint on deeper Iran–Russia cooperation is not the absence of common interests. Rather, it is the absence of a sufficiently shared strategic identity and compatible expectations concerning the meaning of partnership. Both states oppose aspects of Western dominance and support a more multipolar international order; however, they attach different meanings to these concepts. Russia primarily associates multipolarity with great-power status, strategic autonomy, and influence in international decision-making, whereas Iran more strongly associates it with sovereignty, resistance to external pressure, and reducing dependence on Western-dominated institutions.

The same divergence is evident in their interpretations of regional conflicts. In Syria, for example, both countries supported the Assad government and opposed Western intervention, but Iran interpreted the conflict through the framework of the Axis of Resistance and regional security, whereas Russia viewed Syria primarily as a means of preserving its great-power status and expanding regional influence. Similarly, the Zangezur Corridor illustrates how shared concerns about Western involvement do not necessarily produce identical perceptions of regional order. Iran is particularly concerned with preserving territorial connectivity and strategic autonomy, whereas Russia approaches the issue primarily through regional influence and strategic management. These cases

demonstrate that cooperation based on common interests does not necessarily generate a shared understanding of security or partnership.

3. 2. Cooperation without Strategic Integration: Economic, Military, and Geopolitical Dimensions

The findings further demonstrate that the expansion of economic and military cooperation has not produced the institutional integration, mutual trust, or long-term strategic commitments normally associated with a comprehensive alliance. Cooperation has largely emerged in areas where the interests of Tehran and Moscow overlap, while areas involving competing strategic priorities remain subject to negotiation and disagreement.

In the political and security sphere, common concerns regarding Western influence, U.S. policies, regional instability, and sanctions have created important incentives for cooperation. Nevertheless, Russia has generally avoided unconditional commitments to Iran because of its broader geopolitical interests and its preference for maintaining flexibility among competing regional actors. Its behavior in international institutions reinforces this pattern. Moscow has supported Iran in some contexts while simultaneously accepting international mechanisms that placed pressure on Tehran when doing so served wider Russian interests. Such behavior is more consistent with pragmatic alignment than with alliance-based solidarity.

Economic relations reveal a similar pattern. Sanctions have encouraged both countries to expand trade, energy cooperation, transportation links, and alternative financial mechanisms. However, bilateral economic relations remain constrained by

structural barriers, limited financial connectivity, logistical difficulties, and competing economic interests. Russia and Iran may cooperate in reducing their vulnerability to Western economic pressure, but they do not constitute deeply integrated economies. Moreover, competition in energy markets illustrates that cooperation and competition can coexist within the same relationship. Iran may regard Russia as an important economic partner, while also perceiving Russian energy policies as potentially limiting Iran's access to international markets. Russia, for its part, can simultaneously view Iran as a useful partner in resisting Western pressure and as a potential competitor in global energy markets.

Military cooperation similarly demonstrates the distinction between coordination and alliance. Defense cooperation has expanded considerably, particularly under changing geopolitical conditions, but its development has not been accompanied by binding mutual-defense commitments. Earlier experiences, including delays in the delivery of the S-300 system, contributed to Iranian concerns regarding Russian reliability, while Moscow's policies reflected its broader calculations concerning international sanctions, relations with Western powers, and regional security. Thus, military cooperation has strengthened bilateral strategic interaction without creating the institutional and normative foundations of a formal alliance.

These findings have broader theoretical implications. A purely realist interpretation successfully explains why Iran and Russia cooperate: both face Western pressure, seek greater strategic autonomy, and benefit from coordination in selected areas. However, realism alone provides a less complete explanation of why extensive cooperation has failed to produce a comprehensive

alliance. Constructivism adds an important dimension by showing that the two states do not possess a sufficiently shared strategic identity or common understanding of their respective roles in the international order. Cognitive Diplomacy further demonstrates how different historical experiences, perceptions, and expectations shape the interpretation of bilateral actions and generate uncertainty about each other's intentions.

The Iran–Russia case therefore suggests that shared interests and common external pressures are sufficient to generate cooperation, but not necessarily sufficient to produce a durable strategic alliance. Durable alliances require a greater degree of convergence in strategic identity, expectations, and interpretations of partnership. Where these elements remain weak or asymmetric, cooperation is likely to remain selective, pragmatic, and subject to continuous renegotiation.

Overall, the findings support the central argument of this study: Iran–Russia relations should not be understood as either a purely antagonistic relationship or a fully developed strategic alliance. They represent a form of interest-based cooperation characterized by selective convergence, pragmatic coordination, and persistent constraints. Constructivism and Cognitive Diplomacy together provide a more comprehensive explanation of this pattern by demonstrating that the durability and limits of cooperation depend not only on what Iran and Russia want materially, but also on how they understand themselves and each other, as well as how they define strategic partnership.

4. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the limitations of Iran–Russia

cooperation cannot be explained solely through material factors such as the balance of power, external threats, or geopolitical interests. While these factors have undoubtedly encouraged bilateral cooperation, they do not fully explain why cooperation has remained limited despite prolonged interaction and increasing coordination in several strategic sectors. By applying Constructivism and Cognitive Diplomacy, this study shows that differences in strategic identity, historical memory, mutual perceptions, and cognitive expectations significantly influence the depth and sustainability of bilateral cooperation. These ideational and cognitive factors help explain why strategic convergence has not evolved into a comprehensive alliance despite substantial areas of shared interest. This study also contributes to the existing literature on strategic partnerships by demonstrating that extensive cooperation should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of strategic alliance formation. Instead, the findings suggest that strategic partnerships exist along a continuum ranging from pragmatic, interest-based cooperation to highly institutionalized alliances characterized by shared identities, mutual trust, and long-term strategic commitments. Within this continuum, Iran–Russia relations are better understood as a case of selective strategic cooperation in which converging interests coexist with persistent differences in strategic priorities and perceptions.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that shared support for a multipolar international order does not necessarily imply a common understanding of its meaning or objectives. While both countries challenge aspects of the existing international order, they interpret multipolarity through different historical experiences, strategic cultures, and foreign policy identities. Similarly, external pressures—including international sanctions, regional conflicts,

and changing global power dynamics—have encouraged bilateral cooperation but have not eliminated the underlying differences that continue to shape each country's strategic calculations. Given the qualitative nature of this research, the findings should be interpreted as providing evidence that supports, rather than conclusively proves, the proposed interpretation of Iran–Russia relations.

Future changes in the international system, regional security environment, or domestic political priorities may alter the patterns of cooperation identified in this study. Consequently, the conclusions presented here should be understood within the temporal and analytical scope of the research. Finally, the rapidly evolving international environment following the Ukraine war, the transformation of regional security arrangements in the Middle East, the expansion of emerging multilateral institutions, and the evolution of global economic corridors provide important opportunities for future research. Further studies may examine how these developments influence the cognitive perceptions, strategic identities, and partnership expectations of both Iran and Russia, and whether they contribute to deeper institutionalized cooperation or reinforce the existing pattern of pragmatic and selective strategic interaction.

Authorship Contribution Statement

There has been a division of responsibility during the conduct of this research in terms of data collection or analysis in the following way: Conceptualization of the research is done by the first author and literature review is done by the second author. Both authors contributed equally to the analysis of findings and writing of the original and subsequent drafts. All authors have seen and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of the Use of AI and AI Assisted Technologies

This article was not authored by artificial intelligence. The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing and improving clarity. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Ethical Considerations Statement

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, double publication/submission and any form of misconduct against publication ethics. Authors have properly cited all sources of ideas, words, and materials including pictures, charts, tables and statistics used in their paper.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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