

Russia-Iran treaty signifies a 'breakthrough' in ties

by M. K. Bhadrakumar,* India



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(Photo ma)

Russia and Iran, as two immediate neighbours and great powers with a glorious history, had a difficult, chequered relationship through centuries. It goes to the credit of Iranian pragmatism that it learned to live with the consequences of Tsarist Russia's expansionism rather than getting locked in eternal enmity. In some ways, it also shared the plight of China at the hands of predatory powers. Such bitter experiences inevitably get embedded in a nation's psyche.

Therefore, the signing of the *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty*¹ between Iran and Russia on 17 January in Moscow is indeed a poignant landmark signifying the mutual acceptance as partners in an equal relationship. It is also an attempt to build guardrails so as to enable a new trajectory of relationship in mutual interests. The Russian President *Vladimir Putin* aptly called it a "breakthrough".

The negotiations were protracted and the signing of the document by the two presidents *Vladimir Putin* and *Masoud Pezeshkian* itself got postponed. But anyone who has negotiated with Iranians would know they often scramble at the last minute with fresh proposals and are at all times tough negotiators – especially, in strategic areas like energy.

On the other hand, both Russia and Iran are intensely conscious that this is a top-down relationship. Russians are quite aware that they are dealing with a new leadership in Tehran that pri-



Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, Moscow, January 17, 2025 (Picture ma)

oritises the improvement of Iran's relations with the West and focuses on its Gulf neighbours who are close allies of the US.

Although Putin approved the draft treaty as far back as last September, the signing of the document itself was deferred. Russia appreciates the rationality and self-restraint that Iran exercises in the development of nuclear programme and its brilliant achievement to attain deterrent capability without developing nuclear weapons. Conversely, Russians would certainly know that Iranians will never barter away their sovereign prerogatives and strategic autonomy with any country.

However, the transition in Tehran following the death of former president *Ebrahim Raisi* introduced created an element of uncertainty as the ensuing closely-fought election and formation of a new government turned out to be a "regime change" of sorts.

The foreign policy strategy of the new government led by *Pezeshkian* – improving Iran's ties with Gulf neighbours (and the West) – is pivoted on the resolution of the nuclear question with the US, which holds the key to the lifting of western sanctions that is the pathway to Iran's economic recovery.

That said, the political will at the leadership level for building a strategic partnership in a long-term perspective is not in doubt. Both Russia and Iran envisage tactical and strategic advantages in working together closely in the conditions under sanctions. Interestingly, Article 19 of the

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Treaty devotes much attention to the sharing of experiences on how to push back the draconian western sanctions.

Pezeshkian underscored that ahead of his visit to Moscow, he spoke with the Supreme Leader *Ayatollah Ali Khamenei* who emphasised “how important it is to develop comprehensive relations with Russia.” The warm, respectful and trustful interaction between Putin and Khamenei has been the lodestar of the relationship in the recent decade. Much will depend on the leadership position after Khamenei, 86, the *Vali-e Faqih* or supreme jurispudent who exercises ultimate authority over all branches of the government, and is Iran’s commander-in-chief.

The salience of the treaty lies in the expansion and deepening of military cooperation, a big leap forward in energy ties with some mega projects on the anvil such as oil swaps and a brand new gas pipeline through Azerbaijan with a planned capacity of 55 bcm [billion cubic metres], joint efforts on de-dollarisation and clearing system in local currency and, on the whole, a qualitatively new level of coordination in the foreign policy strategies of the two countries in both bilateral and multilateral framework such as EAEU, BRICS and SCO.

However, integration into the Eurasian matrix may suit Iran only up to a point, since Tehran gives the highest importance to its strategic autonomy and historically lacked a “bloc mentality.” Curiously, Article 3 of the treaty painstakingly flags the maleficent activities that neither side should undertake against the other!

Iran doesn’t face the threat of foreign aggression, and the agreement falls short of the mutual defence treaty Russia has with North Korea or the US has with over half a dozen Latin American countries and the Philippines (but not Israel.) Nonetheless, Pezeshkian has said that a full-fledged military cooperation with Russia is now possible. “The enemy should have no illusions that we can easily be defeated,” he remarked and left it at that.

The treaty does not obligate the two countries to come to the other’s defence if one is attacked; they agree, instead, not to provide military or other assistance to the aggressor!

Suffice to say, the treaty falls short of an alliance while it could, arguably, have the “butterfly effect” of an alliance on regional politics. Iran has experienced that Russia remained passive vis-a-vis the intensive and relentless Israeli air

attacks against its deployments in Syria. Moscow even put in place a deconfliction mechanism in place bilaterally with Tel Aviv to prevent mistaken attacks on each other – although Russia and Iran were fighting on the same side as comrades-in-arms during the Syrian civil war.

The treaty will be severely tested if a US-Iran rapprochement gets under way during President *Donald Trump’s* presidency – however preposterous that might seem. But Iran’s dependence on Russia will only increase if Trump reverts to the “maximum pressure” strategy and works to undercut the growing Saudi-Iranian amity to persuade Riyadh to normalise with Israel in the spirit of the Abraham Accords and reset its foreign policy compass to the default position casting Iran in adversarial terms.

Prima facie, this is unlikely to happen, since a Middle Eastern conflict is not in Trump’s agenda. In fact, the Saudi Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman’s* call to Trump on Wednesday highlighted an *offer to invest \$600 billion*,² underscoring the shift in the Kingdom’s regional priorities. The *White House readout*³ also stressed “efforts to bring stability to the Middle East, bolster regional security, and combat terrorism [...] and Saudi Arabia’s international economic ambitions over the next four years as well as trade and other opportunities to increase the mutual prosperity.” There was no reference to Iran.

Agreements per se do not change anything. The key lies in their implementation. The construction of Bushehr nuclear power plant got unduly delayed as Russians dragged their feet under pressure from the US and Israel forcing Tehran to file a case claiming damages. Of course, circumstances are different today but how far Russia will be willing to transfer advanced military technology to Iran remains an open question.

The prospects of the Russia-Iran treaty becoming a game changer in regional politics will also depend on the current transformation in Saudi-Iranian normalisation and the related trends in regional politics consolidating. Russia becomes a stakeholder in reinforcing such trends. There is no question that with growing uncertainties in Russian-Turkish relations and the rivalries in the Black Sea (which is no longer a “Russian lake”), Iran becomes a key partner in Russia’s regional connectivity. Unsurprisingly, the treaty acknowledges that cooperation in the Caspian Sea region is vital.

Russia's keenness to get the *International North-South Transport Corridor* (INSTC) fully operational is self-evident. The treaty (Articles 20 and 21) dwells on the transportation sector as a strategic area in the Russian-Iranian relationship. Iran stands to gain in its positioning as a dependable regional hub connecting Russia with some of the key countries in the Global South, including India and Pakistan.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/russia-iran-treaty-signifies-a-breakthrough-in-ties/>, 24 January 2025

¹ <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2025/01/18/3239891/contents-of-iran-russia-strategic-deal-made-public>

² <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/5104222-saudi-crown-prince-trump-discuss-expanding-partnership-between-2-countries>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/01/readout-of-president-donald-j-trump-call-with-crown-prince-mohammad-bin-salman/>