

# Iran in Ukraine: “Look to the East” Policy or Trapped in a Moral and Political Predicament?

BY MOJTABA MAHDAVI

**What’s the history behind Iran’s friendly support of Russia’s war on Ukraine?**

**From “Negative Equilibrium,” to “Look to the East”**

**N**egative Equilibrium (“*Movazene-ye Manfi*”) is known as the signature foreign policy of Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-1953). Mosaddeq’s policy of an *active neutrality* aimed to protect Iran’s independence and interests against both Britain’s and Soviet Union’s colonial ambitions to exploit Iran’s oil resources. A decade later and during the Cold War in 1961, the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) took Mosaddeq’s policy to a new global level to preserve sovereignty, independence and interests of the Global South against the neocolonial rivalry between the US and the USSR.

Inspired by a decolonial discourse of the 1970s and Iran’s own rich history of anticolonialism, the 1979 Iranian revolution and the postrevolutionary polity adopted the policy of “Neither the East Nor the West” (“*Na Sharqi, Na Qarbi*”), echoing Mosaddeq’s motto of “*Negative equilibrium*.” Neither the East nor the West served as the official policy of the postrevolutionary state for a couple of



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decades. More recently, however, there has been a clear shift in the official discourse of Iran’s ruling elites by choosing a new policy of “Look to the East.”

## THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARD AND SANCTIONS

Three factors have contributed to that foreign policy shift in postrevolutionary Iran. The first and foremost is post-Cold War global politics, which replaced a bipolar global order with US unilateralism in the 1990s. Since the 2000s, however, the US unilateralism has declined and we are now living in a multipolar, or a “multiplex world” — that is, “a world without the hegemony of a single power or a single set of values,” in which new regional actors are *involved*. Iran’s “Look to the East” policy, formulated by conserva-

tive Ali Larijani, was first declared in 2005 under the hardliner President Mahmood Ahmadinejad. Since then, the Iran-Russia relationship has undergone a significant transformation, partly due to the increasing influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the Iranian state. The policy did not gain much traction at the time but has been revived over the past few years in response to new U.S. economic sanctions.

These comprehensive new US/West economic sanctions were the second determining factor. They left Iran’s ruling authority with one of the two options: either rapprochement with the West or “Look to the East” policy. The latter gained momentum in recent years due to the deteriorating relationship between Iran and the West, especially af-



Mohammad Mosaddeq | © Wikimedia

ter President Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the US “maximum pressure” policy in 2018. The hardliners in the US and Iran blocked reconciliation between Iran and the US.

### *Tehran considers Russia’s attack on Ukraine to be Moscow’s legitimate response to its security concerns*

The third factor is the deliberate choice by Iran’s hardliners, who actively pursued the “Look to the East” policy to protect the economic and political interests of the ruling oligarchs, or the “*deep state*’s” crony clerico-military capitalism. A closed, isolated and rentier economy monopolized by the ruling oligarchs in Iran has produced systemic corruption, which exclusively benefits that ruling crony clique. The comprehensive economic sanctions have profoundly contributed to the rise of a mafia/shadow economy, a clerico-military kleptocracy at the expense of the ordinary people’s interests. Hence, the “Look to the East” policy, at the cost of a balanced relations with global economy, has protected the ruling hardliners in Iran. Upon his election in June 2021, the hardliner President Ebrahim Raisi reasserted the importance of the “Look



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad | © Majid Haghdoust, Wikimedia

to the East” policy and visited Moscow in January 2022.

#### **IRAN-RUSSIA’S UNBALANCED RELATIONS**

Postrevolutionary Iran and Russia have cooperated on various issues, including the war in Syria and the Caspian Sea dispute. They have also signed several agreements on energy and transportation, including the construction of a nuclear power plant in Bushehr. Iran’s Ukraine policy, however, uniquely reveals Iran-Russia’s unbalanced relations.

Iran did not vote against UN General Assembly resolutions calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces and addressing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict; it abstained and adopted a posture of neutrality. Iran has not recognized the annexation of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. Nonetheless, Tehran considers Russia’s attack on Ukraine to be Moscow’s legitimate response to its security concerns, and blames the escalation of tensions on the United States and its NATO allies.

With Western sanctions squeezing Russia’s defense industry and depleting its military supplies, Moscow is increasingly turning to outside sources for help, including Belarus, Iran, North Korea, and possibly China. According to both the Ukrainian government and Western intelligence agencies, Russia has been reportedly employing Iranian-made *Shahed-136* drones, known as *Geranium-2* in Russia, in the conflict.

Several news outlets have reported that Russia is considering acquiring two Iranian missile systems, the *Fateh-110* and *Zolfaghar*, due to their lower cost, availability, and survivability. While Iran maintains that it only provided Russia with a small number of drones before the conflict, both the US and the European Union have accused Iran of regularly supplying drones to Russia, leading to the imposition of sanctions by the EU. In October 2022, the US State Department accused Iran of violating UN Security Council Resolution 2231 by selling drones to Russia, a claim France and the UK supported. According to

### *Iran’s gas and oil resources could have replaced Russia’s gas exports to Europe*

the NATO officials, Moscow and Tehran have planned to construct a drone factory in Russia capable of manufacturing thousands of drones per year. In return, Russia will supply Iran with advanced fighter jets, helicopters, air defense systems, and possibly to assist the Iranians with their missile program.

Iran’s ruling hardliners, in sum, view the West as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic. They also believe that future poles in the international system will be in the East; hence, the “Look to the East” policy guarantees their survival. Iran has supported Russia in its war with Ukraine by providing drones and potentially ballistic missiles, with



Part of a drone shot down near Kupiansk, considered by experts to be an Iranian made *Shahed-136*

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The emblem of IRGC | © Wikimedia

the aim of creating a reciprocal commitment from Russia to support Iran, politically and militarily. Besides, to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), exporting drones to a former superpower sends a strong message of deterrence to Iran's regional rivals, and consolidates Iran's position as a major regional power. It also provides an opportunity to test these weapons in a real battlefield.

### MISCALCULATING ON UKRAINE

The Russian aggression of Ukraine could have provided a unique opportunity for Iran-West rapprochement if the Iranian authority had chosen not to side with Russia. Iran's gas and oil resources most likely would have replaced Russia's gas exports to Europe. Moreover, Iran could have revived and restored its nuclear negotiations with the West, removing or reducing the economic sanctions and possibly becoming an important pole of energy supply to the West.

Tricked and fooled by Russia, as well as their own massive miscalculations, Iran's hardliners in power were expecting a swift victory for Russia, a harsh winter for Europe, and gaining a leverage in their nuclear negotiation with the West. Russia's attack on Ukraine, they thought, would destabilize the Western-centric structure of the international system in a way that ultimately secures Iran's national interests. This was a miscalculation. Iran's hard-liners naively did not even pay close attention

to China's neutral position on this war. Furthermore, they seem not to understand that Iran and Russia are rivals, not partners, in global market energy. Besides, being under economic sanctions and underdeveloped, Russia is neither Iran's main trading partner nor is it capable of offering support for Iran's much needed economic and technological developments. Finally, Russia has never protected Iran's interests in Syria against Israeli attacks. Iran's military bases have constantly been bombarded by Israel under the Russian watch in Syria over the past few years. Iran's Ukraine policy, in sum, seems to have weakened Iran's positions, and deteriorated the West and in particular Europe's relations with Iran.

### *Putin intends to use Iran as leverage*

A weak and isolated Iran is beneficial to Russia under Putin. Hence, dragging Iran into the Ukraine war contributes to further deteriorating Iran-West relations, consolidates Western economic sanctions against Iran, and endangers the success of Iran's nuclear deal. All of this, Putin thought, would push Iran further towards Russia, turning Iran into Putin's playing card in his negotiations with the West. Iran's public opinion interprets Russia's behavior as duplicitous and sees that Iran has taken a Russian bait that imperils Iran's national interests. Iran had been deceived by Russia. Putin intends to involve Tehran in the Ukraine war to use Iran as leverage, to alleviate its own isolation, and partly divert the international pressure from Moscow. Even some critical voices within the Iranian state leveled allegations against Russia, claiming that Moscow deliberately disclosed information about the drone shipments to the media, pushing Iran away from the West and dragging Iran into the Ukrainian crisis.

### NEUTRALITY IN THE "MULTIPLEX WORLD"

In the current multiplex world, rath-

er than the old form of non-alignment during the Cold War, we may witness "multi-alignment or cross-cutting alignments" among states, protecting the collective interests of the regions and the world. And yet, one relevant legacy and lasting lesson of the non-alignment norm for the Global South "is not to take sides in great power competition". The current war in Ukraine is in part a war between NATO and Russia. As much as we may critique NATO's expansionist policy and acknowledge its responsibility in the Russia-Ukraine war, Putin's illegal and unethical invasion of Ukraine is categorically and unconditionally condemned. Hence, in such circumstances, the Global South, Iran included, should take an ethical position of *active neutrality* in great power positions.

Iran's postrevolutionary state — a victim of an aggression and airstrikes in the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88) — regrettably and naively cooperates with an aggressor today. Western sanctions, isolation, miscalculation and growing authoritarian trends inside the Iranian state seem to have played major roles for Iran to take such an unethical and self-destructive policy.

Iran-Russia complex relations across centuries have experienced many ups and downs, mostly filled with mistrust. Russia, however is Iran's powerful neighbour. A wise diplomacy requires maintaining good and balanced mutual relations, while keeping a clear distance from Russia's rivalry with the West and other emerging world powers. Siding with Russia in its aggression against Ukraine is a moral predicament and a profound political miscalculation for Iran's ruling authority. It is a clear violation of Iran's moral principle and geostrategic policy of *active neutrality*, represented in Mosaddeq's signature policy of Negative Equilibrium and the revolutionary slogan of Neither the East Nor the West. ■

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