

# The Complexities of the Iran-China-Russia Triangle

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Most strategic commentators view Iran as an integral component of the Russia-China grouping. As a result of the US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear deal/Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) 2015, there is no doubt that Iran's ties with US have witnessed a serious deterioration and Tehran's proximity with Beijing and Moscow has increased. In 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year agreement, referred to as 'strategic accord' which sought to strengthen economic, defence and security relations. The agreement was signed during the tenure of Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani's successor Ebrahim Raisi has been seeking to further strengthen ties with China, and has referred to as an 'Asia centric' policy which focuses on China. China has been purchasing oil from Iran in spite of US sanctions.

Moscow and Tehran are also likely to sign a similar agreement on the lines of the 25-year Tehran-Beijing agreement. During his visit to Russia in January 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi presented a draft of a 20-year agreement between Russia and Iran. Iran seeks to strengthen economic and trade relations through this agreement (as of 2021, bilateral trade between Moscow and Tehran was estimated at \$3.5 billion). Iran has also been seeking to strengthen economic relations with Russia under the umbrella of the Eurasia Economic Union.

A few points need to be borne in mind. First, before the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has had reasonable relations with a number of US allies — including UK, Germany, France, Japan and India — who have actually been hoping for the revival of the 2015 JCPOA deal, so that they can revive purchase of oil and revive other economic linkages. In February 2022, days before the Ukraine war began, the Iranian President Raisi while addressing the sixth summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) in Qatar's capital Doha, had even hinted at possibility of Iran being able to supply oil to Europe. After the outbreak of the war, US had expressed greater urgency towards the revival of the 2015 deal, and easing of some sanctions on Iran to make up for the shortfall caused by the sanctions on Russia.

## Countries buying oil from Russia

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More recently, Tehran has not been particularly happy with countries choosing to buy oil from Russia at cheaper prices. Iran's oil exports to China for instance dropped from 700,000 to 900,000 barrels per day (bpd) in March to 200,000 and 250,000 bpd. As a result of this, an estimated 37 million barrels of Iranian oil were stored on tankers at sea in Asia in earlier this month (in early April, 22 million barrels of Iranian oil were in floating storage near Singapore). China's decision to import oil from Russia and reduce its purchases from Iran is important because China's import of oil from Iran has kept the latter's economy afloat. India and UAE have also been purchasing oil from Russia.

While Tehran has not been particularly happy with the fact that countries are purchasing oil from Moscow, Russia has been seeking to learn about mechanisms to avoid sanctions, and Moscow and Tehran have also been seeking to build economic relations and to create joint companies, banks and funds.

Here it would be pertinent to point out that Russia was playing the role of an intermediary between US and E3+1 countries and Iran. Even after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Russia had got the US to state that sanctions imposed upon Moscow will not impact its economic ties with Iran.

Said Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov: "We've received written guarantees. They are incorporated into the text of the agreement itself."

Russia and Iran have been jointly providing military assistance to the ruling Syrian regime, led by Bashar Assad, in the Syrian civil war and with the withdrawal of Russian forces, Iran has not only increased its military presence in Syria, but also has been the main supplier of petrol and other fuels to Damascus (Russia was the main supplier of oil to Syria before the crisis). Earlier this month, Syrian President Assad visited Iran to further strengthen ties with the latter, it was his second visit to Iran after the beginning of Syria's civil war in 2011. The Syrian President met with his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi as well as Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

It has been argued that Russia after withdrawal of troops from Syria would not like to allow Iran to single handedly fill in the vacuum created by the exit of Russian forces.

The recent events are a clear reiteration of the fact that it is tough to view geopolitics from simplistic binaries. As a result of the Ukraine crisis, there has been a dramatic shift in the global geopolitical landscape and economic considerations are also propelling countries to reset their ties with other countries. While there is no doubt that there are numerous convergences between Iran, Russia and China, each of them will ultimately give precedence to its own national interest.

[Photo by Russian Ministry of Defense]

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.*

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