

Grand Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Part I

By Emil Avdaliani, Non-Resident Fellow at Geocase

September 17, 2020

Sha



Geography matters

To understand modern Iran, its geopolitical aspirations in the Middle East and the South Caucasus and Central Asia, geography is of crucial importance. More than in the case of any other large Middle Eastern state, modern Iran's geography is a determining factor in its foreign policy. In fact, it has been the case for millennia. Let us start with some basics.

Geography consists of rarely changing features, such as rivers, mountains, deserts, large forests, and seas. It conditions human behavior and thus the behavior of entire states. A simple look at the map of a country or a region can give some perspective on what the state's long-term interests are. Take, for example, a map of the Middle East, which reveals three prominent features: Anatolia, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Iranian Plateau. These geographical areas are virtually synonymous with the states located on those territories: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Each of the three has long-term regional ambitions, and the behavior of each is more or less conditioned and moderated by its geographical location, features, and neighbors – none more so than modern Iran.

As in ancient or medieval times, modern Iran's major population centers are surrounded by almost impregnable mountains and deserts as well as water barriers. In the west and northwest are the Zagros Mountains, which bar Iran from Iraq. In the north, the Elburz Mountains as well as Armenia's mountainous lands serve as a defensive shield. The Caspian Sea to the north and the Arabian Sea to the south are yet more impregnable barriers. To the east and northeast lie the harsh climate of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Turkmenistan's semi-barren steppe-lands to the north-east keep Iran's provinces more or less safe (barring occasional attacks by nomadic peoples). The fact of being both geographically contained and geographically defended has defined Iranian grand strategy from the ancient Persian (Achaemenid, Sasanian, Safavid) empires to modern Iran.

The country's mountains and deserts have made it almost impossible to conquer and then keep under continuous control. Consider, for example, several of history's greatest conquerors. The Mongols in the 13th c. and, later, Tamerlane in 14th c. successfully invaded the Iranian plateau, but to keep it, they either had to deploy tens of thousands of troops (which they were unable to do) or co-opt the local population (which they did) by allowing them to participate in the country's governance. The same goes for Alexander the Great, Iran's most successful conqueror. Following his conquest of the land, he co-opted the local elites to hold onto the state – and after he died, Iran quickly regained its independence.

However advantageous this mountainous and desert geography can be, it should be also mentioned how it limits Iran's projection of power abroad. The geography has historically precluded Tehran's attempts to project successfully its power into Central Asia or Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Iranians were active in Georgian, Armenian, and modern-day Azerbaijani territory until the coming of the Russians in the late 18th century, the South Caucasus mountains, rivers, and gorges have constrained Iran's military and economic potential.

Strategically speaking, the most advantageous territory through which Iran can project its power has historically been the western frontier, or modern-day Iraq (historical Mesopotamia). The region has always been rich in population and natural resources and has therefore been worth controlling. Indeed, history shows how crucial the region has been to Iran's strategic vision. Take, for instance, the Achaemenians, followed by Parthians and Sasanians. All these dynasties hung onto Mesopotamia and even placed their capital (in case of Parthians and Sasanians), Ctesiphon, along the Euphrates River near modern-day Baghdad. This is what is paradoxical about Iran. Although the land has been protected by powerful geographic barriers, Iranians nevertheless have worked hard to prevent foreign military presence in the territories surrounding the Iranian plateau. Any foreign influence that might penetrate to the heart of Iran would be tantamount to a strategic weakening of the Iranian state.

This explains why Tehran is now politically involved in Iraq, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. The US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Russians in Central Asia, and a potential EU/NATO presence in the South Caucasus are worst-case scenarios Iran has always striven to avoid. The modern Iranian state's strategic outlook is thus consistent with the country's ancient and medieval history. The Achaemenian, Parthian, Sasanian, Safavid and subsequent dynasties were all trying to dominate Iraq, the South Caucasus, parts of Central Asia and Afghanistan. Only the Achaemenian Empire extended its borders in all directions, reaching the Mediterranean and Black Seas. That latter precedent explains Tehran's

involvement in modern-day Syria and Lebanon and the race to extend its footprint to the Mediterranean coast. Even Iran's ongoing involvement in Yemen, which might seem to lie outside the logic, has a precedent: in the late 570s CE, the Iranian Shah Khusro Anushirwan invaded southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula to control the trade routes running from Egypt to India through the Red Sea.

Geopolitical imperatives rarely change, and this is neatly reflected in Tehran's modern foreign policy. Nowadays Iran is pursuing the same external policy goals as were its ancient and medieval predecessors. Geography would also largely explain Iran's current involvement in several war theaters around the Middle East.

Iran's Land Corridor to the Mediterranean

In the early 620s CE, just before the Arab conquest of the Middle East, last great Sasanian Shah, Khosrow II, besieged Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium. His forces had already occupied Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and other former Byzantine lands. This was a momentous event in world history, as the Iranians had not reached the Mediterranean Sea since the end of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 BC.

However, back then the Iranian success proved short-lived. Ambitions were checked for the next 1,400 years, until now when numerous reports indicate that Iran-backed forces have nearly established the control over the Syria-Iraq border.

This is an exceptional moment in Iran's history. It means that at long last, the country once again has a contiguous land bridge from its territory, through northern Iraq and Syria, right through to the Mediterranean coast. The Iranians are now able to link up with their foremost regional proxy, the Lebanese Hezbollah. After years of conflict in Iraq and Syria, and the US military withdrawal, Tehran is transforming into a powerful geopolitical player whose hard military influence will be projected hundreds and maybe thousands of kilometers beyond its borders.

The corridor was built up gradually over the course of the Syrian civil war. Hence comes the importance attached to the killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani. The head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was instrumental in establishing the Iraq-Syria land bridge. His vision was similar to that of Iran's famous shahs. Soleimani's removal aimed at undermining those Iranian imperial efforts.

Still, that is not the whole story and accepting the land corridor's efficacy at face value would not be entirely correct. The corridor is quite complex as it weaves across Arab Iraq, via Iraq's Kurdish north, into Kurdish northeastern Syria, and through the battlefields north of Aleppo, where Russia, Iran, and their allies cooperated militarily, but also vied with each other for the control over vital infrastructure.

The Iranian route could be also threatened by independent actors. The Kurds of Syria, who populate the northeast corner of the country and who operate separately from the Kurds of Iraq, could forestall the nascent Iranian corridor.

Nevertheless, the emerging corridor has a geopolitical importance. The route would physically link a range of Iranian allies: Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Assad regime in Syria; and the Iran-influenced government in Baghdad.

Relations with Russia

An integral part of Iran's grand strategy are relations with Russia. Both countries cooperate in Syria, though they also share crucial long-term differences on the future of the war-torn country. Many consider this Russo-Iranian cooperation as a backbone for their strong long-term bilateral ties, but there are other theaters in which Moscow and Tehran have decade long successful cooperation. Their partnership in the South Caucasus and the energy-rich Caspian Sea area exemplify this trend.

Iran has traditionally been wary of Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Powerful Iranian dynasties, such as the Achaemenids and the Sasanians in the ancient period and the Safavids and the Kajars in the 16th-18th centuries, aspired to play a major role in the South Caucasus and elsewhere. Two wars in the 19th century over the South Caucasus territories, and Russian influence in northern Iran in the 20th century, made close cooperation between the two powers an unlikely scenario.

But major encouragement for building closer relations took place in the decades following the Cold War when western countries imposed sanctions on Tehran's nuclear program, while Russia experienced economic troubles and general diminution of its geopolitical influence. As a result, though Iran was constrained from projecting its economic and political influence towards the South Caucasus, its interests grew increasingly aligned with Russia's vision of the region.

Then came much larger incentives such as the war in Syria (since 2011) and the US pressure on Moscow (since the Ukraine crisis of 2014) and Tehran (since president Trump's tenure). As a result, trends in Iranian-Russian relations—namely, a strong partnership in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea emerge.

The focal point of this cooperation is the nascent north-south transit corridor between Iran and Russia, which passes through Azerbaijan. The three countries are already somewhat connected via rail links, and there is a notion that Russia's Baltic ports and the Persian Gulf could one day enjoy efficient connections. Tehran and Moscow see Azerbaijan as a vital component in advancing north-south trade and energy corridors in the South Caucasus, and they work together to block Western-led infrastructure projects. Prospective north-south corridors rival the east-west ones promoted by Western countries, and perhaps also the east-west Belt and Road Initiative promoted by China.

Another common interest is to avoid any foreign military presence in the region (Georgia and Azerbaijan). From the Iranian perspective, the growing military cooperation between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan could pose a problem similar to that posed by the expansion of NATO, primarily in Georgia. Russian thinking could well align with Iranian fears here, as both fear Western military encroachment in their spheres of influence. Both also loathe Turkish influence in the region. The Russians are more predominant than the Turks in terms of military presence, but in trade and investments, Ankara could be at the forefront. True, there have been positive developments in Azerbaijan-Tehran relations recently, but it is still Ankara that enjoys strong relations with Baku and supports it in the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Moreover, Baku also fears Tehran's close relations with Armenia could result in the shift in Iran's stance on Nagorno Karabakh. Overall, too many questions persist which minimize trust between Azerbaijan and Iran.

While the lifting of sanctions against Iran by the world's leading countries helped it assert itself in the South Caucasus economically, Tehran has continued to face major challenges from both Russia and Turkey. Armenia-Russia relations are too ingrained in terms of military and economic cooperation for Iran to insert itself effectively. Elsewhere, Turkish economic and political influence still overshadows Iran's ambitions. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia will use all its tools to block Tehran's greater involvement.

Further east, the Russians and the Iranians cooperate in the Caspian region. The Caspian Sea has long been a site of geopolitical contention among the five littoral states (Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia). In 2018, the Convention agreed upon by the Caspian states clarified the right of all five to lay underwater pipelines, subject to the agreement of those states through whose sectors the pipelines or cables would pass. Although these were the agreed terms, laying underwater pipelines goes against Russian and Iranian geopolitical interests as it would allow Central Asian states (primarily Turkmenistan) to export their large gas resources to Europe through the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP). Both Iran and Russia want to do this themselves, although the latter has clearly had the upper hand since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia and Iran: A Global Context

There is an evolving international context that underpins closer Iranian-Russian cooperation in general and the re-alignment of their interests in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. Washington restored sanctions on Tehran in 2018, strengthening the Russian and Iranian view that the US is against the rise of regional powers across the Eurasian landmass. Russia experiences its own burden of Western sanctions, which helps to create a shared understanding in Moscow and Tehran that the US is a common geopolitical rival.

This consensus fits into the geopolitical "chaos", or what some would call as the strategic realignment of multiple power-brokers on the Eurasian landmass. On the surface, it seems easier for the US to manage an increasingly divided Eurasia now that there are numerous regional powers competing with one other rather than the monolith that characterized the more stable era of the Cold War. However, this unpredictability represents a marked break from what the West had to cope with in previous decades. In the more predictable Cold War era, geopolitics was important, but it was intermingled with democratic and idealistic premises.

In modern Eurasia, there is a clear shift towards a new, more untenable world order. Russo-Iranian cooperation in Syria and their understanding over the South Caucasus is not merely an alliance of convenience. It is only one element of a much broader cooperation that spans other regions of the Eurasian landmass.

The Russian perspective too should be considered and the map of Eurasia provides a glimpse into the rationale behind the Kremlin's desire for closer cooperation with Iran. Russian political thinkers of the 1990s believed that Iran and Turkey should have been the pillars of future Russian power in the Middle East. The so-called Eurasianists – those who believe Russia is in neither Europe nor Asia – saw that Moscow needed Tehran and Ankara to compete successfully with the West and rebuild its lost influence in the Middle East. As it was during both the Romanov period and the Soviet Union, it is in modern Russia's perennial interest to keep Iran at least neutral.

It is thus in Russia's and Iran's interests to cooperate in obstructing western military influence in the Middle East. Both consider the evolving US grand strategy in the Eurasian landmass detrimental to their respective geopolitical imperatives. To Russia, the US violates the post-Cold War order by ramping up military pressure on Moscow in what once constituted the Soviet Union. To Iran, the US is trying to limit its nuclear ambitions as well as its projection of power to the Mediterranean and elsewhere.

This common fear of the US could be considered one of the drivers behind the close Russo-Iranian cooperation. Both states also share the understanding that the world should no longer be led by one center (the West), but rather be multipolar. The long-term enmity towards the US is reflected in major US strategic documents which identify Moscow and Tehran as most troublesome rivals after China.

Divisions with Russia

Russia and Iran also share differences that hinder building more comprehensive bilateral ties. For instance, Iran wants to initiate their oil and gas exports to the European market. The country is particularly well positioned to take a share of the European gas market as the EU is worried about Russian predominance in that area. Iranian gas could be a very good tool with which to assuage European fears. But to export its gas, Tehran will need the Black Sea ports, such as Batumi and Poti in Georgia, and use the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline.

In Syria Russo-Iranian differences tend to appear between wartime allies as the conflict draws to a close. Indeed, Iranian and Russia media from time to time features hints of growing disagreements on long-term political aims and military moves of the war-time allies. Moreover, even Iran's solidification of the land corridor to the Mediterranean slightly endangers Moscow's position as Tehran will be less inclined to follow the Russian lead.

A good example is Moscow's successful obstruction of Iranian attempts to establish independent pipelines and railways to Armenia and Georgia. Yet another area of disagreements is the simmering Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the early 1990s, the Iranian government made several unsuccessful attempts to mediate the conflict. Since both Armenia and Azerbaijan border on Iran, it is natural to expect Tehran to try to play a bigger role here. However, Russia opposes any Iranian initiatives that threaten to diminish Moscow's role in the conflict resolution.

To conclude, Iran's geography and history provide numerous examples to dissect the country's geopolitical imperatives. Iran's growing influence over Iraq or other borderland territories are a continuation of meticulous grand strategic thinking so peculiar to the Iranian psyche.

Russia – a crucial pillar – in Iran's evolving vision is both a rival and at times a close geopolitical partner. All depends on the issue and the region where Tehran's and Moscow's interests intersect. Larger reasons though such as the US' growing pressure on Russia and Iran will continue pulling both states closer.