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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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03.06.2025

## Iran and Russia: Three steps into strategic convergence

Tehran and Moscow's evolving alliance has achieved key economic and political milestones, but mutual defense pacts remain elusive, with lingering distrust still defining the limits of their cooperation.



As Iran prepares for an official [state visit](#) by Russian President Vladimir Putin, the political signal could not be clearer: Iran and Russia are intent on formalizing their deepening partnership amid a global order in flux.

Iranian officials have confirmed that preparations are underway, even if the Kremlin has yet to set the date. For both countries – under siege from western sanctions and entangled in regional flashpoints – this visit is more than a ceremony; it marks an intensifying convergence of strategic purpose.

Putin's trip follows a string of high-level engagements with his Iranian counterpart, President Masoud Pezeshkian, who [took office](#) in July of last year. Since then, the two leaders have met three times: in Ashgabat in October, in Kazan at the BRICS summit, and in January in Moscow to ink a long-term [defense agreement](#). In the post-Ukraine war calculus, few relationships carry the same weight as the Islamic Republic in Russia's pivot eastward.

### **Economic convergence through the EAEU**

Ties between Tehran and Moscow have never advanced in a straight line. Even in their most frictionless periods, progress required determined effort. Still, three crucial milestones passed over the past year suggest that their bilateral relationship is set to accelerate.

The first milestone came on 25 December 2024, when Iran [joined](#) the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as an observer member state. Initially seen as a post-Soviet mechanism to deepen regional economic ties, the bloc's broader ambitions – particularly from Moscow's perspective – quickly became clear. Iran's accession had been a long-standing Russian objective since at least the mid-2010s.

The path to membership began in 2018 with a provisional agreement, but was drawn out by two key factors. The first was Israel's negotiations with the bloc over free trade zones – launched despite a 2016 framework deal – which appeared designed to sabotage Iran's entry. They largely succeeded.

The more substantive obstacle was internal. Under former Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, whose administration tilted westward, the EAEU was seen more as leverage in western talks than a genuine priority. By contrast, late Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi, a strong advocate of Iran's 'Look East' policy, placed higher strategic value on [deepening ties with Russia](#), propelling Iran's EAEU bid forward.

By 2023–2024, trade between Iran and EAEU states hovered around \$3.5 billion. The new agreement slashed tariffs: Iranian duties on EAEU goods dropped to 4.5 percent, while the bloc's tariffs on Iranian exports fell from 6.6 to 0.8 percent.

Within five to seven years, trade volume is projected to hit \$18–20 billion – a substantial gain for a petro-economy whose \$60 billion in exports are more than 80 percent oil and gas. The bloc may also serve as a conduit to third-country markets.

Iran's membership holds political as well as economic value for Moscow. Chief among these is the [International North-South Transport Corridor \(INSTC\)](#), a 7,200-kilometer route connecting St. Petersburg to Mumbai via Iranian territory. Completion of the [Chabahar-Mumbai](#) leg depends on India-Iran ties; the corridor's viability also requires modernizing the Caspian Sea route—a project that gained urgency post-2022.

### **BRICS ... and a whopping strategic partnership**

Politically, the Kremlin's need to forge a multipolar alliance structure – not a full-fledged global bloc, but a web of regional coalitions – has grown as confrontation with the west intensifies.

In this context, Iran's [accession to BRICS](#) on 1 January 2025 marked the second major milestone. BRICS remains politically disjointed – a union of unequals – but its economic logic is compelling. It enables preferential access to massive markets and encourages bilateral flexibility between members.

Though it may not directly shape Iran–Russia relations, BRICS allows both states to expand cooperation in media, culture, and tourism – deepening their ties beyond traditional economic or military frameworks.

But the most consequential event of the year was the signing of a comprehensive strategic cooperation agreement between Tehran and Moscow. As with Iran's drawn-out EAEU accession, the talks revealed lingering distrust. Negotiations began after Russia's February 2022 military intervention in Ukraine.

Russia's motives were transparent: Boxed in by NATO, Moscow sought to strengthen military alliances with regional powers and reap associated economic benefits.

The model agreement was the “comprehensive strategic partnership” [signed](#) with North Korea, which included commitments to scale up trade and a mutual defense clause. If either party is attacked or drawn into war, the other pledges to assist “by all means.”

A similar clause was expected in the Iran–Russia agreement, but never materialized. Instead, the pact reads more like a memorandum of understanding than a military alliance. The gap between its title and substance suggests unresolved disagreements during talks.

Two issues caused the rift. First, Moscow demanded that any military assistance be predicated on Tehran's position being legally airtight under international law – lest Russia be entangled in a nuclear conflict with Tel Aviv. The definition of “aggression” became a flashpoint: What Tehran labels a provocation, Moscow feared Tel Aviv could call a justified “response.”

Second, the scope of assistance – especially the categorical exclusion of nuclear weapons – sparked further discord.

Though a compromise may have been within reach, unconfirmed reports indicate Moscow proposed the transit of Russian personnel or military preparation on Iranian soil – something the deeply sovereign Tehran outright rejected. This categorical refusal ultimately ensured the deal would remain declaratory.

### **The weight of history**

Historical and ideological factors underpin Iran's caution. Since the Caucasus wars of the 19th century – especially the 1826–1828 conflict – securing Iran's northern frontier has been a [persistent concern](#).

That anxiety intensified under the Pahlavi dynasty's staunch anti-communism, compounded in the 1940s by two events: Soviet occupation of northern Iran until 1946, and the Soviet-backed, Kurdish-secessionist Mahabad Republic, widely viewed as an attempt to partition the country.

Simultaneously, Soviet Azerbaijani territorial demands and communist agitation in Iranian Azerbaijan further soured ties. Though these events belong to a pre-revolutionary era, the Islamic Republic's early years were no less wary of Moscow – fueled in part by Iranian communists' strategic missteps. The USSR, much like in Türkiye, was branded the “lesser Satan,” and anti-communism fused with inherited Russophobia.

These sentiments persist and are fueled by pro-west propaganda outlets. Among Iranian elites, accusations that Russia has “stabbed Iran in the back” are a common rhetorical tool for western-aligned factions. In 2023, a diplomatic crisis erupted after the Russian Foreign Ministry's equivocal stance on sovereignty over contested Persian Gulf islands and muddled comments about the waterway's name.

This blunder – unfolding as Iran's EAEU talks progressed – not only inflamed Iranian Russophobia but handed ammunition to domestic pro-west voices, reinforcing the trope of “colonial Russia” as an [unreliable partner](#).

### **What lies ahead**

Even so, the Iran–Russia strategic pact is far from toothless. Though it omits a mutual defense clause, it commits both states to deepen security and defense ties and explicitly pledges cooperation to counter external destabilizing forces in the Caspian, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and West Asia. The emphasis is timely – especially in the wake of Syria's devastation.

Today, Tehran faces heightened threats. Analysts and officials alike debate whether Israel will launch [direct strikes](#) against Iran, whether the US will try – or even be able – to restrain such moves, and whether US forces will intervene if Tel Aviv provokes open conflict. No clear decisions have emerged.

This uncertainty may prompt caution in the short term. But in the long run, only the alliances forged today will determine whether Tehran can deter tomorrow's wars.

**JUN 2, 2025**