



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

Title: **RUSSIA AND CHINA: AN EVOLVING
RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN**

Chairperson: **Dr Temjenmeren Ao**, Associate Fellow, CAPS

Speaker: **Ms Anu Sharma**, Research Associate, CAPS

Discussant: **Ms Chandra Rekha**, Associate Fellow, CAPS

Rapporteur: **Dr Puyam Rakesh Singh**, Research Associate, CAPS

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Major highlights of the Fellow's Seminar held on March 24, 2017 are as follows:

- Studying Iran's geopolitical influence in West Asia and its relationships with Russia and China is important to understand the geopolitical dynamics in West Asia. Being the pivotal states of the Eurasian heartland, the evolving partnership between Iran, Russia and China has strategic implications in terms of enhancing regional supremacy and influence and as a counterbalancing force to the US influence in West Asia. However, Russia and China also pursue their respective geopolitical interests through their partnerships with Iran.
- Iran under sanctions provided China an opportunity to reinforce its foothold in Iran's economic sector, particularly in energy and infrastructure sectors. It also helped Iran to evade the sanctions to some extent. In fact, China imported large amount of hydrocarbon resources and non-energy goods from Iran during the period of sanctions. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in January

2016, the two sides signed deals worth \$600 billion along with a proposal to develop Iran's Chabahar port. Thus, China's energy policy and economic relations with Iran pose challenges to the US hegemony in the region.

- Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran and China in 1971, China's interest in Iran has been mainly energy security. Iran's role in challenging the Western oil companies in the early 1970s was welcomed by Mao Zedong as part of a united Third World resistance to superpower hegemony. However, the relationship was affected by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Iran's "neither east nor west" foreign policy. Again, China followed a policy of neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) which led to China supplying weapons to both Iran and Iraq. The relationship took a new turn under Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policy in the late 1970s.
- China's concerns about Iranian policy include Tehran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz and meddling in China's internal affairs related to Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslim problems. Though China supports Iran's cause for development of nuclear programme for peaceful purposes, Beijing is concerned about the potential threat posed by the Iranian nuclear weapons capability in future.
- The question of Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is another important issue in Iran-China relations. Iran got the observer status in 2005 but its application for full membership in 2008 was denied with China opposing Iran's admission. However, Iran's membership in the SCO can contribute to the 'One Belt and One Road' Initiative as well as strengthen energy and economic cooperation between Iran and China.
- Historically speaking, Iran had maintained a complicated relationship with Russia which is marred by suspicion on the part of Iran about the latter's geopolitical ambitions. During the Cold War period, Iran signed the Baghdad Pact in 1955 to curb communist influence in West Asia. Under the Shah's regime in Iran, both the US and Iran viewed the Soviet Union as a common threat. Again, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iraq was supported by the Soviet Union against Iran. Moreover, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, an immediate neighbour of Iran, further

enhanced the Iranian suspicion of the Soviet Union's ambition in the region. Also, the pragmatic views of some sections of Iranian leadership to engage the Soviet Union for economic and military cooperation was restricted by the Iranian religious fundamentalist group's opposition to strengthening relations with the atheistic regime.

- Since 1989, relations between Tehran and Moscow improved leading to cooperation in the fields of nuclear reactor project at Bushehr and sales of weapons including missiles to Iran. Meanwhile, China and Russia joined hands to delay and weaken the efforts of the US and European countries to impose sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, relations between Iran and Moscow experienced positive trend due to Russia's preoccupation with its own internal problems and the loss of a shared border. In addition, the relationship was cemented by Russia's role in Iranian nuclear negotiations and the cooperation and coordination over the Syrian conflict.
- In the wake of the Arab uprisings, Russia experienced a shrinking political and economic presence in West Asia. This development compelled Russia to strengthen its resolve to involve in negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme since 2012. Russia's commitment to this cause is exemplified by Russia's role in the talks between Iran and P5+1 in November 2014. To counter the US influence in Iran, Russia also extended cooperation to Iran to construct up to eight new power plants in Iran under an agreement signed between Tehran and Moscow in November 2014.
- Iran has a stake in Syria which provides good reason for Tehran to support Russia's intervention in favour of the Assad regime. Iran's policy towards Syria is aimed at maintaining its influence in the region while Russia wants to safeguard its geopolitical interest in the Mediterranean Sea region to further the cause of Russia's great power politics. Moreover, Iran has its geopolitical interests in Lebanon and Syria to safeguard and consolidate its influence in West Asia against the pro-western nations. The religious affinity of both Iran and Syria adhering to Shia Islam also plays a role. On the other hand, China is exploiting the Syrian crisis to assert its position as an important player in West Asia, and Beijing has certain differences

with Russia over Moscow's commitment to a multilateral political solution to resolve the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, China, Iran and Russia are working together for the shared goal of ensuring the survival of the Assad regime in Syria.

- Iran has extended cooperation to Russia to facilitate Moscow's military operations against the anti-Assad forces in Syria. For example, Iran allowed Russia to use its airspace and airbase to launch attacks in Syria. Thus, Russia's dependence on Tehran during the Syrian crisis provides an opportunity to cement the relationship between Iran and Russia.
 - While China's foreign policy towards Iran is mostly driven by its energy security concern Russia has a multiplicity of interests and follows a more flexible and broader policy towards Iran. Also, Iran, China and Russia constitute a formidable counterbalancing force in relation to the US because of their economic power, scientific advancement, population, size and strategic location in the Eurasian landmass. Because of the rising US influence in the region, there is potential for the three countries to enhance strategic cooperation. However, in the post-sanctions era, the entry of the European states in Iran to build political and economic relations with Tehran will have implications on Iran's relationship with Russia and China as it will enhance competition between the various players.
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