



The Perception of U.S. Threat and Its Impact on the Russia–Iran Alignment, 2002–2023

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v9i2.3161>

Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of Russia–Iran relations from 2002 to 2023, arguing that strategic convergence has been driven primarily by shared perceptions of U.S. threat rather than short-term tactical interests. Drawing on Stephen Walt’s Balance of Threat theory and qualitative process tracing, it examines how U.S. military interventions, NATO enlargement, and coercive sanctions reshaped Iranian and Russian threat assessments. Three turning points—the 2003 Iraq War, the 2015 joint intervention in Syria, and the 2018 collapse of the JCPOA—accelerated alignment. The article shows that the 2022 war in Ukraine transformed this alignment into a strategically consequential partnership with direct implications for NATO deterrence and Baltic security.

Keywords: Russia; Iran; Threat Perception; Balance of Threat; NATO; Baltic Security

Introduction

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation have undergone a significant transformation since the early 2000s. What was once a relationship characterised by pragmatic cooperation, mutual suspicion, and limited strategic trust has evolved into an increasingly structured and multidimensional alignment. Although Iran and Russia have not formalised a military alliance, their cooperation now spans political coordination, military–technical exchange, energy markets, and sanctions-resilient economic mechanisms (Katz 2012; Divsalar 2019). This evolution reflects not merely tactical opportunism but a deeper convergence in how both states perceive external threats within an international system marked by sustained U.S. pressure and intensified great-power competition.

This article argues that the primary driver of Russia–Iran alignment between 2002 and 2023 is the convergence of threat perceptions—specifically, shared interpretations of U.S. intentions, capabilities, and strategic behaviour—rather than short-term material gains or ideological affinity. Drawing on Stephen Walt’s Balance of Threat theory, it demonstrates that cooperation deepened as U.S. military interventions, NATO enlargement, and coercive sanctions came to be interpreted in both Tehran and Moscow as hostile,

revisionist, and aimed at constraining strategic autonomy (Walt 1990; Dannreuther 2015). These perceptions were reinforced by identity narratives emphasising sovereignty, resistance to Western dominance, and the legitimacy of a multipolar international order (Wendt 1999).

Three turning points are central to this process. First, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq placed American forces on Iran's borders and signalled to Russia that U.S. power could be exercised unilaterally with limited regard for international constraints (Cohen 2003; Gordon 1999). Second, Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 created the first sustained arena of operational cooperation, institutionalising military coordination and diplomatic alignment between Moscow and Tehran (Fulton, Holliday, and Wyer 2013; Dannreuther 2015). Third, the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 undermined Iranian confidence in Western diplomacy and accelerated Tehran's strategic reorientation towards non-Western partners, particularly Russia (Kozhanov 2015; Slavin 2019).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a qualitative shift in this trajectory. Facing unprecedented military, economic, and diplomatic pressure, Russia sought external partners capable of supplying military technology, sanctions-evasion expertise, and alternative trade routes. Iran emerged as a critical external enabler, providing unmanned aerial vehicles and drawing on experience accumulated under decades of sanctions (ICDS 2023; Vinograd 2022). This cooperation transformed Russia–Iran alignment from gradual convergence into a partnership with direct implications for European security.

While existing scholarship on Russia–Iran relations has focused predominantly on the Middle East, Syria, or nuclear diplomacy, far less attention has been paid to the implications of this partnership for Europe—and particularly for NATO's eastern flank (Therme 2018; Rumer 2016). For the Baltic states, which face the most immediate exposure to Russian military power, Iran's role in enhancing Russia's operational endurance introduces a new extra-regional dimension to the threat environment. Iranian-supplied UAVs, sanctions-resilient logistics networks, and diplomatic coordination indirectly strengthen Russia's coercive capacity and complicate NATO deterrence planning (Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2023; NATO 2022).

By situating the Russia–Iran partnership within a broader Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic security context, this article contributes to both International Relations theory and Baltic security studies. Theoretically, it demonstrates the continued relevance of Balance of Threat theory when complemented by constructivist insights into identity and narrative formation. Empirically, it traces how threat perception—rather than ideological affinity or economic complementarity alone—produced a durable alignment with tangible military and strategic consequences. The next section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Balance of Threat and Ideational Convergence

The evolution of Russia–Iran relations provides a compelling case for analysing alignment behaviour under conditions of asymmetric power and persistent external pressure. Traditional balance-of-power theory predicts that states align primarily in response to shifts in material capabilities within the international system (Waltz 1979). However, this approach offers only a partial explanation for the Russia–Iran case. The timing, depth, and durability of cooperation cannot be accounted for by changes in U.S. power alone, nor does balance-of-power logic explain why historical mistrust between Tehran and Moscow gradually receded. Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat theory offers a more precise analytical framework by emphasising that states align against actors they perceive as threatening rather than those that are merely powerful (Walt 1985; Walt 1990).

According to Balance of Threat theory, threat perception is a composite of four elements: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and perceived intentions (Walt 1990, 21–26). Among these, perceived intentions are often decisive, as they shape how material indicators are interpreted.

Identical distributions of power can produce divergent alignment outcomes depending on whether a state views an external actor as benign or hostile. This insight is central to understanding why Russia–Iran alignment intensified following specific U.S. actions—such as military interventions and sanctions escalation—rather than during periods of stable U.S. predominance.

From the Iranian perspective, U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with sustained economic sanctions and regime-change rhetoric, reinforced a long-standing perception of the United States as an existential threat to regime survival (Ahmadian 2015; Slavin 2019). The deployment of U.S. forces along Iran’s borders heightened perceptions of proximity and offensive intent, intensifying incentives to seek strategic partners capable of mitigating U.S. pressure. Balance of Threat theory predicts such behaviour: when a proximate actor demonstrates both capability and hostile intent, alignment becomes a rational response.

For Russia, threat perception followed a parallel but distinct trajectory. NATO enlargement—particularly the accession of the Baltic states in 2004 and subsequent discussions regarding Ukraine and Georgia—was interpreted in Moscow as strategic encroachment into areas of vital interest (Cohen 1993; Jamestown Foundation 1997). Missile defence initiatives and NATO’s enhanced forward presence further reinforced Russian perceptions of vulnerability and declining strategic depth. While the United States framed these measures as defensive, Russian elites increasingly interpreted them as evidence of hostile intent aimed at constraining Russia’s great-power status (Trenin 2018; Rumer 2016).

Balance of Threat theory also explains why Iran has not sought to balance against Russia despite Russia’s superior military capabilities. Threat perception depends not on raw power but on perceived intent. Russian actions since the early 2000s—such as opposition to Sunni extremist groups, limited military presence near Iran’s borders, and diplomatic support in multilateral forums—have generally aligned with Iranian security interests (Kozhanov 2012; Divsalar 2019). As a result, Tehran has not interpreted Russia as a hostile actor requiring counterbalancing behaviour.

While Balance of Threat theory accounts for the structural drivers of alignment, it does not fully explain why threat perceptions became so deeply entrenched and resistant to change. Constructivist approaches complement the framework by highlighting the role of identity, strategic culture, and narrative formation in shaping how states interpret external actions (Wendt 1999). Iranian political discourse emphasises resistance to Western domination and the defence of sovereignty, while Russian strategic narratives increasingly frame the state as a civilisational actor resisting Western liberal universalism (Laruelle 2015; Trenin 2018).

These narratives function as interpretive filters. U.S. sanctions, NATO deployments, and diplomatic pressure are not assessed solely in material terms but are embedded within broader historical and ideological understandings of Western behaviour. This ideational dimension helps explain why similar U.S. policies are perceived by Iran and Russia as existential threats rather than negotiable disputes. Shared narratives also reduce friction between Tehran and Moscow by reframing cooperation as part of a broader struggle against Western dominance rather than a purely transactional partnership.

Importantly, constructivist insights do not replace Balance of Threat theory but reinforce it. Structural pressures create incentives for alignment, while identity narratives amplify and stabilise threat perceptions over time. The Russia–Iran case demonstrates how material indicators of threat and ideational interpretations interact to produce durable strategic behaviour. This combined framework provides the analytical foundation for the empirical sections that follow, enabling a systematic examination of how U.S. actions, regional shocks, and global power shifts translated into sustained Russia–Iran alignment with direct implications for NATO and Baltic security.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, theory-guided research design centred on process tracing to examine how shared threat perceptions shaped Russia–Iran alignment between 2002 and 2023. Because the key variables under investigation—threat perception, strategic intent, and identity narratives—are not directly observable, qualitative methods are most appropriate for reconstructing causal mechanisms and elite interpretations (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2004). The methodological objective is not to test hypotheses statistically but to explain how specific external pressures translated into sustained alignment behaviour over time.

Case Selection and Analytical Scope

The study adopts a single, longitudinal case-study design focusing on Russia–Iran relations over two decades. Single-case designs are particularly well suited to analysing complex foreign-policy processes characterised by path dependency, non-linear development, and interaction between structural and ideational factors (Yin 2009). Russia–Iran relations constitute a theoretically informative case because alignment emerged despite historical mistrust, asymmetries of power, and diverging regional interests. This makes the case a “least-likely” scenario for durable cooperation, thereby strengthening causal inference.

The temporal scope—from 2002 to 2023—captures periods of both limited cooperation and intensified alignment, allowing for the identification of turning points and cumulative effects. This extended time frame also enables the analysis to distinguish between short-term tactical coordination and longer-term strategic convergence.

Process Tracing and Causal Mechanisms

Process tracing serves as the primary analytical tool. Following George and Bennett (2005), the study identifies within-case sequences linking external developments—such as U.S. military interventions, NATO enlargement, and sanctions escalation—to changes in Russian and Iranian strategic behaviour. The method proceeds in three stages.

First, the analysis identifies critical events plausibly capable of altering threat perceptions, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria, the 2018 collapse of the JCPOA, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Second, it traces elite discourse, policy decisions, military cooperation, and diplomatic coordination following these events. Third, observed behavioural changes are evaluated against theoretical expectations derived from Balance of Threat theory and constructivist approaches.

Alternative explanations—such as economic opportunism, transactional arms sales, or ad hoc regional coordination—are explicitly considered. While these factors contribute to cooperation, they cannot account for the timing, depth, or persistence of alignment observed across the full period. Process tracing thus allows for the elimination of competing explanations and strengthens causal claims.

Data Sources and Triangulation

To enhance analytical rigour, the study relies on triangulation across multiple types of sources. Primary sources include official statements and speeches by Russian and Iranian political and military leaders, foreign ministry communiqués, NATO strategic documents, and reports issued by international organisations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA 2015; 2018). These materials provide direct insight into elite threat perceptions and official framing of strategic intentions.

Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic literature on Russia–Iran relations, sanctions, and Middle Eastern geopolitics, as well as policy analyses produced by European and transatlantic research institutions (Katz 2012; Dannreuther 2015; Rumer 2016). Media sources are used selectively to

document specific events, such as arms transfers or official statements, and are cross-referenced with independent analyses to reduce reliance on declaratory rhetoric.

Limitations and Methodological Transparency

The study faces limitations inherent in analysing opaque political systems. Access to internal decision-making processes in Tehran and Moscow is restricted, and official discourse may be strategically constructed. To mitigate these limitations, rhetorical claims are evaluated alongside observable behaviour, including military coordination in Syria and defence-industrial cooperation following 2022 (Fulton, Holliday, and Wyer 2013; ICDS 2023).

The qualitative approach also carries a risk of confirmation bias. This is addressed by systematically testing alternative explanations and highlighting instances of divergence or friction in Russia–Iran relations. Because the research relies exclusively on publicly available sources, it raises no ethical concerns related to human subjects.

Methodological Relevance for Baltic Security Studies

Methodologically, this article contributes to Baltic security studies by incorporating extra-regional actors into threat assessment frameworks. Traditional analyses of Baltic security focus primarily on Russian military capabilities and NATO deterrence. By tracing how Iran enhances Russia’s strategic endurance through military, economic, and logistical support, the study demonstrates how transregional partnerships shape the threat environment on NATO’s eastern flank. This approach provides a framework for analysing future security challenges arising from networked adversarial cooperation rather than isolated state capabilities.

The U.S. Factor in Russia–Iran Relations (2002–2023)

The United States has played a central role in shaping the strategic environments of both Russia and Iran, functioning as the primary external reference point through which threat perceptions have converged. Although Tehran and Moscow differ in regional priorities and political systems, U.S. military power, alliance structures, and economic coercion have been interpreted by both as manifestations of hostile intent rather than defensive policy. Over time, this shared diagnosis transformed the United States from an external variable into the principal driver of Russia–Iran alignment.

Post-9/11 Power Projection and Early Convergence

The period following the September 11 attacks marked a decisive shift in U.S. global posture. Military campaigns in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) dramatically expanded U.S. force presence in regions adjacent to Iran and of strategic relevance to Russia. For Iran, the stationing of U.S. forces on both its eastern and western borders reinforced long-standing fears of encirclement and regime-change intentions (Ahmadian 2015; Jahangiri 2018). Although the removal of Saddam Hussein eliminated a hostile neighbour, Iranian elites increasingly interpreted U.S. power projection as a direct threat to regime survival.

For Russia, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was particularly consequential. Moscow opposed the war and interpreted it as evidence that the United States was willing to bypass international institutions and reshape regional orders unilaterally (Cohen 2003; Orlov, Timerbaev, and Khlopkov 2002). This perception weakened Russian confidence in post–Cold War cooperation and contributed to a broader reassessment of U.S. intentions across multiple theatres.

While Russia and Iran did not immediately deepen bilateral cooperation, the Iraq War established a shared interpretive framework in which U.S. power was viewed as unconstrained and revisionist. In Balance of Threat terms, perceived intent—rather than aggregate capability—became the critical variable driving alignment incentives (Walt 1990).

NATO Enlargement and Russian Threat Perception

As the 2000s progressed, NATO enlargement emerged as a central pillar of Russian threat perception. The accession of the Baltic states in 2004, followed by discussions regarding Ukraine and Georgia, was interpreted in Moscow as strategic encroachment into areas of vital interest (Cohen 1993; Jamestown Foundation 1997). Russian officials framed NATO expansion not as defensive integration but as a forward deployment of U.S. influence and military infrastructure closer to Russian borders.

From a Balance of Threat perspective, NATO enlargement increased perceived proximity and offensive potential, amplifying Russian concerns about U.S. intentions (Walt 1990). These perceptions were reinforced by missile defence initiatives and NATO's enhanced forward presence in Eastern Europe. Although Iran was not directly affected by NATO expansion, Tehran viewed these developments as further evidence of U.S. efforts to consolidate military dominance and constrain adversarial states.

Sanctions as Structural Pressure

Economic sanctions became an increasingly central instrument of U.S. foreign policy toward both Iran and Russia. For Iran, sanctions targeting energy exports, financial institutions, and shipping were interpreted as tools designed to undermine regime stability and force political capitulation (Katzman 2020). For Russia, sanctions imposed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a shift toward long-term economic coercion aimed at constraining Russian power and influence (Connolly 2018; Rumer 2016).

Sanctions thus functioned as a shared structural pressure, reinforcing perceptions of U.S. hostility and incentivising coordination. Over time, Russia and Iran explored sanctions-resilient mechanisms, including alternative payment systems, energy coordination, and non-Western trade routes. While economic cooperation alone does not explain strategic alignment, sanctions contributed to a shared understanding that U.S. pressure was systemic and enduring rather than episodic.

The JCPOA Withdrawal and the Collapse of Diplomatic Alternatives

The U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018 represented a critical inflection point. For Iran, the collapse of the agreement delegitimised engagement with the West and weakened domestic actors advocating diplomatic accommodation (Slavin 2019). Tehran concluded that neither the United States nor Europe could reliably deliver sanctions relief, accelerating its strategic reorientation toward non-Western partners, particularly Russia and China.

For Russia, the JCPOA withdrawal reinforced narratives of U.S. unilateralism and disregard for multilateral agreements. Moscow positioned itself as a defender of diplomatic norms while simultaneously benefiting from Iran's growing dependence. Diplomatic coordination between Russia and Iran intensified in UN Security Council debates and nuclear-related discussions following 2018 (IAEA 2018).

Syria as an Arena of Strategic Response

The Syrian conflict provided the first sustained arena in which convergent threat perceptions were translated into coordinated action. Both Russia and Iran opposed Western-backed efforts to remove the Assad regime, interpreting them as part of a broader pattern of U.S.-led interventionism (Dannreuther 2015). Russia's 2015 military intervention relied heavily on Iranian ground forces and regional networks, while Iran depended on Russian airpower and diplomatic cover.

The success of joint action in Syria reinforced mutual confidence and demonstrated that coordinated resistance could constrain Western influence. It also institutionalised military and diplomatic coordination, creating mechanisms that would later facilitate cooperation in other theatres.

The United States as the Central Driver

Across the period examined, U.S. behaviour emerges as the most consistent driver of Russia–Iran alignment. Military interventions, alliance expansion, and economic coercion were interpreted in both Tehran and Moscow as evidence of hostile intent. In line with Balance of Threat theory, these perceptions—rather than shifts in material power alone—generated incentives for strategic coordination (Walt 1990).

By the late 2010s, both states viewed U.S. pressure as structural and bipartisan, embedded in the international system rather than contingent on specific administrations. This shared diagnosis laid the groundwork for the rapid deepening of cooperation after 2022, when Russia’s confrontation with the West reached unprecedented intensity.

Turning Points in Russia–Iran Relations (2002–2023)

Although Russia–Iran relations evolved incrementally over time, three major turning points fundamentally reshaped the depth and trajectory of cooperation: the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Russia’s 2015 military intervention in Syria, and the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Each episode intensified shared threat perceptions, altered strategic calculations, and expanded the scope of bilateral coordination. Together, they transformed a historically cautious relationship into a more coherent and institutionalised alignment.

The 2003 U.S. Invasion of Iraq: Strategic Shock and Converging Perceptions

The U.S. invasion of Iraq constituted the first decisive geopolitical shock that brought Iranian and Russian threat perceptions into closer alignment. Prior to 2003, cooperation between Tehran and Moscow existed but remained constrained by mutual mistrust, competing regional interests, and divergent expectations regarding relations with the West (Andreeva 2007; Arbabzhan 2003). The overthrow of Saddam Hussein demonstrated Washington’s willingness to use overwhelming force to reshape regional orders, fundamentally altering strategic calculations in both capitals.

For Iran, the invasion produced contradictory outcomes. While the removal of a hostile regime eliminated a long-standing adversary, the broader implications were deeply destabilising. U.S. forces were now deployed on both Iran’s eastern and western borders, reinforcing fears of encirclement and regime-change intentions (Ahmadian 2015; Jahangiri 2018). From a Balance of Threat perspective, Iran faced a proximate power with demonstrated offensive capability and perceived aggressive intent, increasing incentives to seek strategic partners capable of mitigating U.S. pressure.

For Russia, the Iraq War signalled the erosion of multilateral constraints on U.S. behaviour. Moscow interpreted the invasion as evidence that the United States was prepared to act unilaterally and marginalise other major powers in managing international security (Cohen 2003; Orlov, Timerbaev, and Khlopov 2002). This perception contributed to a broader reassessment of U.S. intentions that would later shape Russian responses to NATO enlargement and Western involvement in the post-Soviet space.

Although Russia and Iran did not immediately form a close partnership, the Iraq War established a shared diagnostic framework: both concluded that U.S. power was not merely dominant but revisionist. This convergence reduced political barriers to cooperation and laid the groundwork for deeper alignment in subsequent years.

The Syrian Conflict and Russia’s 2015 Intervention: Operationalising Alignment

If the Iraq War created the structural conditions for alignment, the Syrian conflict provided the first opportunity to operationalise it. Russia’s military intervention in Syria in 2015 marked a qualitative shift from diplomatic coordination to sustained military collaboration. For Iran, Syria represented a critical

pillar of its regional security architecture, linking Tehran to Hezbollah and serving as a buffer against hostile actors (Fulton, Holliday, and Wyer 2013).

As the Syrian state weakened and opposition forces advanced, Iran deployed advisers, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) units, and allied militias to preserve the Assad regime. By 2014, however, Iranian efforts alone were insufficient to reverse the conflict's trajectory. Russia's intervention altered the balance decisively, providing airpower, intelligence, and diplomatic leverage at the UN Security Council (Dannreuther 2015; Trenin 2018).

The Syrian campaign institutionalised military coordination, intelligence sharing, and high-level political consultation between Tehran and Moscow. It also reinforced shared threat perceptions, as both states interpreted Western support for opposition forces as part of a broader pattern of regime-change interventionism. The success of joint action strengthened mutual confidence and demonstrated that coordinated resistance could constrain U.S. and European influence in the Middle East.

The 2018 Collapse of the JCPOA: Accelerated Strategic Reorientation

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 constituted a profound strategic shock for Iran and an important inflection point in Russia–Iran relations. The agreement had represented Iran's primary pathway toward sanctions relief and limited reintegration into the global economy. Its collapse delegitimised diplomatic accommodation in Iranian strategic discourse and empowered factions advocating closer ties with non-Western partners (Slavin 2019; Sanaei 2017).

Iranian elites concluded that the United States could not be trusted to uphold negotiated agreements and that Europe lacked the autonomy to shield Iran from U.S. sanctions. As a result, Tehran intensified its “Look East” strategy, prioritising partnerships with Russia and China (Azizi 2022). Military–technical cooperation with Russia expanded, while diplomatic coordination increased in multilateral forums.

For Russia, the JCPOA collapse reinforced narratives of U.S. unilateralism and the erosion of the rules-based international order. Moscow positioned itself as a defender of multilateralism while benefiting from Iran's growing strategic dependence. Following 2018, Russia supported Iran's integration into Eurasian institutions and deepened cooperation in energy and security domains (Kozhanov 2015).

Cumulative Effects of the Turning Points

Taken together, these three turning points produced cumulative effects that reshaped Russia–Iran relations. First, they reinforced shared perceptions of U.S. hostility and reduced confidence in Western restraint. Second, they narrowed diplomatic alternatives, increasing the relative attractiveness of bilateral coordination. Third, they institutionalised cooperation mechanisms across military, diplomatic, and economic domains.

By the eve of the Ukraine war, Russia–Iran relations had reached an unprecedented level of strategic alignment. While the partnership remained short of a formal alliance, its foundations were sufficiently robust to enable rapid expansion once Russia faced acute confrontation with the West after 2022.

The Ukraine War and Strategic Convergence

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represents the most consequential turning point in the evolution of Russia–Iran relations. While earlier developments fostered gradual alignment, the Ukraine war transformed the scale, urgency, and strategic significance of cooperation. Facing unprecedented military losses, comprehensive Western sanctions, and diplomatic isolation, Russia increasingly relied on Iran as a critical external enabler. In turn, Iran leveraged the conflict to enhance its strategic relevance, expand military–technical cooperation, and position itself as an actor capable of influencing European security dynamics.

Military–Technical Cooperation: From Tactical Support to Strategic Integration

The most visible manifestation of post-2022 convergence has been the expansion of military–technical cooperation, particularly in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and related defence technologies. Russia's early battlefield challenges—including shortages of precision-guided munitions and difficulties in sustaining long-range strike campaigns—created immediate demand for alternative systems. Iranian-produced Shahed-series UAVs provided a cost-effective solution, enabling sustained attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and the saturation of air defence systems (ICDS 2023; Vinograd 2022).

Beyond their tactical utility, UAV transfers signalled a deeper shift from episodic arms sales to more embedded forms of cooperation. Reports of joint production facilities, technology transfer, and training assistance indicate movement toward defence-industrial integration rather than ad hoc support (Raine and Kottasová 2022; Katz 2023). For Russia, this reduced dependence on constrained domestic production and Western components. For Iran, participation validated the maturity of its defence industry and enhanced its status as a military supplier operating beyond the Middle East.

Military cooperation also extended to advisory support and operational coordination. Iranian personnel reportedly assisted with deployment and adaptation of UAV systems, while Russian expertise contributed to improvements in guidance and electronic warfare resilience (ICDS 2023). This multidimensional interaction represents an unprecedented level of Iran's involvement in a European conflict and underscores the strategic nature of the partnership.

Economic Convergence Under Sanctions Pressure

The Ukraine war accelerated parallel processes of economic alignment driven by shared exposure to Western sanctions. Iran's decades-long experience in sanctions evasion—through informal financial networks, alternative shipping arrangements, and triangulated trade routes—became particularly valuable to Russia after 2022 (Katzman 2020; Connolly 2018).

A central pillar of this convergence is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), linking Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran. As traditional European trade routes became restricted, the INSTC gained strategic importance as a sanctions-resilient alternative (CEPA 2023). Investment in Iranian ports, railways, and logistics infrastructure increased, embedding bilateral cooperation into long-term geoeconomic architecture. This shift reduces European leverage over Russian trade and enhances Iran's role as a critical transit hub.

Energy coordination further reinforced alignment. Russia and Iran intensified cooperation within OPEC+ frameworks, explored oil-for-goods arrangements, and coordinated strategies to bypass Western price caps (Rumer 2016). These measures reflect a shared objective of weakening the effectiveness of economic coercion as a tool of Western influence.

Ideational and Political Alignment

Material cooperation alone does not fully explain the depth of post-2022 convergence. Ideational alignment—rooted in shared narratives of sovereignty, multipolarity, and resistance to Western dominance—has become increasingly prominent. Russian officials frame the Ukraine war as a defensive response to NATO expansion and Western encirclement, a narrative echoed by Iranian leaders who attribute the conflict to NATO's eastward expansion (IRNA 2022; Khamenei 2017).

These narratives serve both domestic and international purposes. Domestically, they legitimise political authority by emphasising external threat. Internationally, they position Russia and Iran as leading actors in an emerging coalition resisting Western hegemony. Shared discourse reduces friction, normalises cooperation, and stabilises the partnership beyond immediate material incentives.

Why 2022 Was Different

Although earlier turning points fostered alignment, the Ukraine war produced conditions of exceptional intensity. Russia's acute vulnerability—stemming from military attrition, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation—created sustained demand for external support. Iran, facing fewer reputational costs after decades of sanctions, seized a strategic opportunity to expand influence and extract long-term benefits (Azizi 2022; Katz 2023).

The war thus transformed Russia–Iran relations from gradual convergence into a partnership with direct consequences for European and NATO security. Cooperation now affects not only regional balances in the Middle East but also the strategic environment on NATO's eastern flank, marking a qualitative departure from earlier phases of alignment.

Analysis: Threat Perception, Identity, and Implications for NATO and Baltic Security

The preceding sections demonstrate that Russia–Iran alignment is not a temporary wartime arrangement but the outcome of a cumulative process driven by shared threat perceptions, reinforced by ideational convergence, and operationalised through sustained cooperation. This section synthesises the empirical findings through three analytical lenses: Balance of Threat dynamics, identity-based interpretation of external pressure, and the implications of this alignment for NATO—and particularly for the Baltic states.

Threat Perception as the Primary Driver of Alignment

Balance of Threat theory provides a coherent explanation for the trajectory of Russia–Iran relations. Both states interpret U.S. behaviour not merely as the exercise of superior power but as evidence of hostile intent. Military interventions, NATO enlargement, and sanctions are understood as instruments designed to constrain strategic autonomy and reshape regional orders (Walt 1990; Dannreuther 2015). Alignment intensified not when U.S. power peaked, but when its actions were perceived as revisionist and coercive.

For Russia, NATO enlargement—especially the accession of the Baltic states in 2004 and the subsequent strengthening of NATO's forward presence—heightened perceptions of proximity and vulnerability (Cohen 1993; NATO 2022). Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups and rotational deployments in the Baltic region have been framed in Russian strategic discourse as evidence of encirclement rather than deterrence (Trenin 2018). These perceptions persist despite NATO's emphasis on defensive intent.

For Iran, the sustained U.S. military footprint in the Middle East and the persistence of sanctions reinforced fears of regime change and economic strangulation (Ahmadian 2015; Katzman 2020). Although Iran's threat environment is geographically distinct, the interpretation of U.S. pressure as structural and enduring mirrors Russian assessments. This convergence explains why Tehran and Moscow increasingly view cooperation as a strategic necessity rather than a tactical option.

Identity, Narrative, and the Stabilisation of Cooperation

Structural pressures alone cannot fully explain the durability of Russia–Iran cooperation. Identity narratives and strategic culture amplify threat perception and stabilise alignment over time. Iranian political discourse emphasises resistance to Western domination and the defence of sovereignty, while Russian strategic narratives increasingly portray the state as a civilisational actor resisting Western liberal universalism (Wendt 1999; Laruelle 2015).

These narratives function as interpretive filters. Sanctions, NATO deployments, and diplomatic pressure are framed not as policy disagreements but as illegitimate coercion. This framing reduces domestic resistance to alignment and legitimises cooperation with non-Western partners. It also mitigates

historical mistrust between Tehran and Moscow by embedding their relationship within a broader narrative of resistance to Western hegemony (Divsalar 2019).

Ideational convergence has practical consequences. Shared narratives facilitate coordination across military, economic, and diplomatic domains and reduce the political costs of cooperation. They also normalise Iran's involvement in a European conflict, reframing support for Russia in Ukraine as part of a global struggle rather than a regional deviation (IRNA 2022; Khamenei 2017).

Implications for NATO and Baltic Security

For NATO, the Russia–Iran partnership complicates traditional threat assessments that focus primarily on Russia's indigenous military capabilities. Iran functions as a force multiplier, enhancing Russia's military endurance, economic resilience, and diplomatic insulation. These effects are particularly relevant for NATO's eastern flank.

The Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—are uniquely exposed due to their geographic proximity to Russia and reliance on deterrence and rapid reinforcement. Iranian-supplied UAVs, demonstrated extensively in Ukraine, increase Russia's capacity for persistent surveillance, saturation attacks, and infrastructure disruption (ICDS 2023; Vinograd 2022). While Iran poses no direct military threat to the Baltic region, its contribution to Russian capabilities indirectly alters the regional balance.

Sanctions evasion networks further undermine Baltic security interests. The Baltic states have been among the strongest advocates of robust EU sanctions against Russia. Iran's expertise in circumventing sanctions reduces the effectiveness of this tool, prolonging Russia's capacity to sustain military operations (CEPA 2023). This dynamic weakens one of Europe's primary non-military instruments of pressure.

Geoeconomic shifts also matter. The expansion of the International North–South Transport Corridor reduces Europe's leverage over Russian trade and diminishes the strategic significance of traditional east–west corridors, including those passing through the Baltic region (CEPA 2023). Over time, this may erode economic leverage that complements military deterrence.

Finally, ideational convergence between Iran and Russia contributes to information and narrative challenges. Shared messaging portraying NATO as destabilising and the West as declining feeds into broader disinformation ecosystems. Although Baltic societies have invested heavily in resilience and counter-disinformation measures, sustained narrative pressure can undermine cohesion at the European level and complicate consensus-building within NATO (Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2023).

Synthesis

The Russia–Iran partnership represents a structural shift rather than an episodic alignment. Driven by shared threat perceptions, reinforced by identity narratives, and operationalised through military and economic cooperation, it reshapes the strategic environment facing NATO's eastern flank. For the Baltic states, the key implication is that regional security is increasingly influenced by extra-regional actors whose actions enhance Russia's capacity to challenge deterrence and resilience.

Understanding this networked threat environment is essential for adapting NATO strategy and Baltic defence planning to contemporary geopolitical realities.

Discussion: Policy Implications for Europe and the Baltic States

The consolidation of Russia–Iran alignment has significant implications for European security policy and, in particular, for the Baltic states. While Iran remains geographically distant from the Euro-Atlantic theatre, its growing role in sustaining Russian military and economic resilience demonstrates that contemporary security challenges cannot be assessed solely within regional boundaries. This section

outlines the key policy implications of the partnership and identifies areas where European and Baltic responses require adaptation.

Rethinking Threat Assessment Beyond the Regional Frame

European and NATO security planning has traditionally centred on Russia's domestic military capabilities and its immediate neighbourhood. The Russia–Iran partnership challenges this approach by highlighting how extra-regional actors can indirectly shape the balance of power on NATO's eastern flank. Iranian contributions—most notably in unmanned systems, sanctions-evasion expertise, and logistics—extend Russia's ability to sustain prolonged confrontation with the West (ICDS 2023; CEPA 2023).

For the Baltic states, this underscores the need to adopt a networked understanding of threat. Russian coercive capacity is no longer derived exclusively from indigenous resources but is embedded in transregional partnerships that reduce vulnerability to Western pressure. Baltic threat assessments must therefore incorporate external enablers when evaluating Russian military endurance and escalation potential (Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2023).

Implications for Deterrence and Defence Planning

The demonstrated effectiveness of Iranian-supplied UAVs in Ukraine carries direct lessons for Baltic defence planning. Persistent surveillance, saturation attacks, and low-cost strike systems complicate air defence and resilience strategies, particularly for small states with limited strategic depth (ICDS 2023). While NATO has strengthened its integrated air and missile defence posture, the Russia–Iran partnership highlights the urgency of accelerating investments in counter-UAV capabilities, electronic warfare, and civil defence infrastructure.

Deterrence messaging must also adapt to the realities of external support. Traditional deterrence by punishment relies on the ability to impose costs that alter adversary calculations. When Russia can draw on partners such as Iran to offset losses or circumvent sanctions, the effectiveness of punitive measures diminishes. For the Baltic states, this reinforces the importance of deterrence by denial—ensuring that any aggression would fail to achieve strategic objectives regardless of external assistance (NATO 2022).

Sanctions Enforcement and Strategic Resilience

Iran's role in assisting Russia to adapt to sanctions exposes vulnerabilities in European economic statecraft. The Baltic states have consistently advocated robust sanctions enforcement, yet Iran's experience demonstrates how determined states can mitigate economic pressure over time (Katzman 2020; Connolly 2018). This calls for closer coordination between European sanctions policy and global enforcement mechanisms, including engagement with transit states and non-Western partners.

At the same time, policymakers should recognise the limits of sanctions as a standalone tool. When targeted states perceive pressure as existential, economic coercion may reinforce alignment rather than induce compliance. Complementary measures—such as supply-chain security, defence-industrial capacity, and protection of critical infrastructure—are essential to prevent sanctions evasion from translating into sustained military capability (Rumer 2016).

Strategic Communication and Narrative Competition

The ideational convergence between Iran and Russia also has implications for Europe's strategic communication environment. Shared narratives portraying NATO as destabilising and the West as declining are amplified through diplomatic messaging, aligned media outlets, and international forums (IRNA 2022; Khamenei 2017). Although these narratives resonate unevenly across European societies, they complicate consensus-building and long-term security commitments.

For the Baltic states, which have invested heavily in societal resilience and counter-disinformation measures, this reinforces the need to integrate narrative competition into defence planning. Strategic communication should be treated as a core security function and coordinated closely with NATO and EU partners to counter external messaging that seeks to undermine alliance cohesion (Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2023).

Strategic Foresight and Policy Adaptation

Finally, the Russia–Iran partnership highlights the importance of strategic foresight in European security planning. The alignment did not emerge suddenly in 2022 but evolved over two decades in response to cumulative pressures. Early indicators—such as growing military cooperation in Syria or increasing sanctions coordination—were visible well before the Ukraine war.

For Baltic policymakers, this underscores the value of sustained investment in intelligence cooperation, horizon scanning, and analysis of extra-regional dynamics. As global power competition intensifies, developments in the Middle East and Eurasia will increasingly shape security outcomes on NATO’s eastern flank. Anticipating these linkages is essential for maintaining credible deterrence and resilience.

Conclusion

This article has examined the evolution of Russia–Iran relations between 2002 and 2023, arguing that their strategic alignment is best explained by convergent perceptions of U.S. threat rather than short-term tactical interests, ideological affinity, or economic opportunism alone. Drawing on Balance of Threat theory and qualitative process tracing, the analysis has shown how U.S. military interventions, NATO enlargement, and sustained economic coercion reshaped Russian and Iranian threat assessments and progressively reduced incentives for engagement with the West (Walt 1990; Dannreuther 2015).

Three turning points—the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Russia’s 2015 military intervention in Syria, and the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018—played a decisive role in accelerating alignment by reinforcing shared interpretations of U.S. hostile intent and narrowing diplomatic alternatives (Slavin 2019; Kozhanov 2015). These developments institutionalised cooperation across military, diplomatic, and economic domains. The 2022 war in Ukraine marked a qualitative shift, transforming a long-term convergence into a strategically consequential partnership with direct implications for European security (Katz 2023; ICDS 2023).

The findings underscore the continued relevance of Balance of Threat theory when complemented by constructivist insights into identity and narrative formation. While material power and proximity mattered, perceived intentions—filtered through ideational frameworks emphasising sovereignty, resistance, and multipolarity—proved decisive in shaping alignment behaviour (Wendt 1999; Laruelle 2015). This interaction helps explain why Russia and Iran deepened cooperation despite historical mistrust and persistent areas of divergence.

For NATO and the Baltic states, the Russia–Iran partnership highlights the limits of purely regional threat assessments. Iran’s contribution to Russia’s military endurance, sanctions resilience, and strategic messaging alters the security environment on NATO’s eastern flank even in the absence of direct Iranian military presence. Baltic security planning must therefore account for networked adversarial cooperation and extra-regional enablers that enhance Russia’s coercive capacity (NATO 2022; Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence 2023).

More broadly, the case demonstrates how prolonged external pressure can generate unintended strategic consequences by encouraging alignment among targeted states. As global power competition

intensifies, understanding how threat perception drives transregional partnerships will be essential for anticipating future security challenges. The Russia–Iran alignment is not an anomaly but a manifestation of a more interconnected and contested international order—one in which European and Baltic security is increasingly shaped by dynamics beyond Europe itself.

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