

Asserting an Identity: Explaining Paradox of “Strategic Partnership” between Iran and Russia

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Abstract

Iranian-Russian relations after the Collapse of the Soviet Union have been characterized by different, often contradicting terms. While the most common expression used by the two countries and, in particular, by Iran is the term “strategic partnership”, during the past two decades Islamic Republic and Russian Federation have had disagreements upon numerous issues within the different spheres of their bilateral relations. The objective of this paper is to give an explanation to the contradicting behavior of Moscow and Tehran, while dealing with each other.

The paper will highlight the importance of identity factor previously ignored in the studies on Iranian-Russian relations. Moreover, it will emphasize the importance of Iranian identity for studying the paradox of “strategic partnership” between Iran and Russia. In order to accomplish these tasks, the paper will separately discuss Iran's and Russia's contemporary self-perception. Further on the basis of the findings, made from the analysis of the roles, prescribed by two countries to themselves, conclusions will be drawn concerning the Russia's attitude to Iran and the vice versa.

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Introduction

Relations between Moscow and Tehran during the Post-Cold War years have been characterized by many Iranian and Russian politicians as “strategic partnership”, “friendship”, “mutually beneficial cooperation”, etc. The expression “strategic partnership” has been particularly common in Iranian rhetoric, but does this expression represent the reality of bilateral relations between Moscow and Tehran?

Official statements, made by the two countries’ leaderships during the past three decades, have shown that Tehran’s and Moscow’s interests collide in different spheres of their cooperation. Russian Federation’s disagreements with Islamic Republic are visible in both political and energetic cooperation of two countries. They compete with each other in energy, especially natural gas sphere. They regularly have disagreements in the frames of negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program. In 2011 Iran filed a lawsuit against the Russian Federation at The International Court of Arbitration because of Moscow’s decision to cancel its agreement with Tehran on the S300 air defense systems. In this light the frequent use of term “strategic partnership” by two countries’ politicians for characterizing Iranian-Russian relations raises several questions. The most important one is “Why?” Why do they try to represent their relations as strong tactical or even strategic partnership? Why do they pretend to ignore the disagreements and contradictions, existing in their relations? Why are they acting as having strong and stable relations, the so-called “strategic partnership”?

The majority of researchers tend to explain these efforts of Russia and Iran to overcome their disagreements at least on rhetorical level by both countries’ desire to resist US hegemony in the World. In this paper I will discuss raise other possible factors, influencing Iranian-Russian “strange” behavior.

My main hypothesis is that the self-perception of Iran and Russia significantly influences the current course of the two countries’ relations. Moreover, in the next chapters of

my thesis I will suggest, that besides the American hegemony's factor, both countries' alignment policy and hence their mutual relations are strongly affected by their historical identity – imperialism in case of Russia and Iranian identity in case of Islamic Republic.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to highlight the importance of identity and role perceptions in Iranian-Russian relations. Moreover, the paper takes into consideration additional factors, which causes Moscow's and Tehran's ambiguous behavior towards each other, a behavior, which was very accurately named push-pull-but-don't-let-go dance, by John W. Parker.¹ Detailed research on these factors will not only help gain better understanding of the developments in Iranian-Russian relations, but also will give an opportunity to be more precise in the researches on the foreign policy of two countries and the developments in Eurasian region.

As far as arguments, made in this paper are will touch such topics as the identity and self-perception of Iran and Russia, a strong emphasis will be made on the role of ideas and identities in the interstate relations, the theoretical basis of the thesis is rather constructivist, than realist or liberalist. Constructivist approaches to the international relations do not ignore the impact of such factors as ideas and social identity on the state's foreign policy. Moreover, they are strongly emphasizing the importance of historical processes on the formation of state identity.² From a constructivist perspective, the central issue is how different groups conceive of their interests and identities produced by interactions, institutions, norms and cultures.³ The concept of identity is crucial for this paper. In other words, I will base my research on the assumption that domestic factors and international relations are entangled. The paper does not claim that domestic factors (in this case, the perception of their roles by the Islamic Republic

¹ John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of Shah*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009),301.

² Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy* no. 110 (1998): 40.

³ Ibid., 40.

and the Russian Federation) are determining international relations of states, it rather tends to emphasize the significance of domestic factors in Iranian-Russian relations.

The core arguments of the thesis are based on the conception, that identity influences the role of a state in the international system, on its turn the given role accepted by a state becomes relatively constant. In other words, an actor comes to identify itself with a particular role and accordingly limits its behavior in accordance with the expectations and demands generated by this role.⁴ The so-called role theory is relatively new and the influence of national identity on the institutional level still requires detailed analysis. In brief, the role theory assumes that the role is integrity of attitudinal and behavioral expectations that the actor has from himself.⁵ The roles are neither deterministic nor infinitely elastic.⁶ Roles are the categories of behavior that states and individuals rely on in order to guide themselves through a complex world.⁷ Without relatively constant role conceptions, states will have difficulty with functioning and will not be able to impose order on their environment.⁸ Further while writing about the roles and self-perception of states I will be referring to the institutionalized national identity, a self-perception, which is accepted by the state apparatus.⁹

Thesis has three main chapters. The first one represents general overview of the disagreements and contradictions, present in Iranian-Russian relations. The discussion of contradictions is necessary for showing that Iranian-Russian 'strategic partnership' is rather an illusion, than reality. Much of the content analysis comes from secondary literature. Besides, I used media resources in order to represent the two countries' state officials'

⁴ Michael Barnett, "Institutions, roles, and disorder: the case of the Arab states system," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. iii (1993): 274.

⁵ Rosenau quoted in, Glenn Chafetz, Hillel Abramson, and Suzette Grillot, "Role Theory and Foreign Policy: Belarussian and Ukrainian Compliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime," *Political Psychology* 17, no. 4 (1996): 732.

⁶ Chafetz, Hillel, and Grillot, "Role Theory and Foreign Policy," 733.

⁷ Ibid., 733.

⁸ Ibid., 733.

⁹ For more on the role conceptions, played by states, see Chafetz, Abramson and Grillot, also K. J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1970): 233-309.

statements on the other party. In particular, I looked on the negative and critical declarations of the two countries on each other. Although I was monitoring two countries' media resources in Russian and Persian, I did not make explicit references to Iranian and Russian sources. In order to be precisely correct with the English translation I made references only to such major outlets as BBC, Russia Today, official website of Institute for Caspian Cooperation, etc. As far as the paper's volume is limited I made references only to the statements made by the two countries' presidents, prime and foreign ministers. While raising issues concerning the significance of role and identity factors in Iranian-Russian relations, besides academic literature, I was largely using media sources. Media resources were particularly helpful for understanding the general attitude of Iran and Russia towards each other. This first introductory chapter will prepare ground for further discussion of the linkages between two countries' self-identification and their bilateral relations.

In the next two chapters in order to investigate the reasons of Russia's and Iran's contradicting behavior, I provide historical overview of the two countries' identity formation process in the 20th century. The aim of second chapter is to analyze Russia's self-perception as a Great Power and to represent its foreign policy choices and its attitude towards Iran. I will discuss the self-identification of Russia, in order to understand the behavioral context in which Moscow makes its foreign policy decisions. In this chapter I discuss USSR's perception of its own role in the context of Cold War and then compare it with the role, which Russian Federation prescribes to itself on international level. Another area of significance is the discussion of the Cold War context and its legacy in contemporary world perception by Russian Federation. Without this discussion of similarities between Soviet Union's self-perception and the Russian contemporary identity it is not possible to find rational explanations for the contradictions, present in the context of contemporary Russian-Iranian relations.

The aim of the third chapter is to represent the context of Iranian identity perception. Third chapter discusses the different identity layers, present in the Islamic Republic's self-identification. In this chapter I argue, that the representation of Iran's self-perception as completely Islamic is oversimplification and does not represent the reality. Moreover, I argue, that Iran does not identify itself as an ideological country, whose foreign policy depends only on the pursuit of ideological goals. In this chapter I don't tend to minimize the significance of Iran's Islamic identity, rather I tend to show other non-Islamic identity components, which are influencing Islamic Republic's foreign policy and particularly its relations with Russia. The questions raised in this chapter are particularly interesting because of their unique character. While there is extremely wide literature on the Islamic essence of Iran's foreign policy, and the influence of Khomeini's ideology and concept of Islamic state on the foreign policy of Iran, the possible influence of non-Islamic Iranian identity factors is not taken into account.

Literature Review

In contemporary IR literature constructivist researches, concerning Iranian-Russian relations are hard to find. One of the main significant works on Russian-Iranian relations is Helen Belopolsky's work, named *Russia and the Challengers: Russia's Alignment with China, Iran, and Iraq in the Unipolar Era*, which analyses Russia's cooperation with Iran, by taking into account the importance of role and identity. In this work Belopolsky emphasizes the importance of Russia's self-perception and the role which Russian Federation prescribes for itself while conducting relations with the so called rogue states – Iran, Iraq and Russia. This analysis, though, is one-sided; it represents only Russian case, while Iran's perceptions of its role on international arena are not included in this analysis as a factor, influencing bilateral relations of Moscow and Tehran. Hence, although Belopolsky's work is significant because of its uniqueness, it does not represent Iranian context. To put it differently literature on Iranian-Russian relations is its Russo-centric character. The main emphasis in the majority

of researches on the two countries' cooperation is made on the Russia's policy towards Iran, because it is generally believed that Russia is choosing the music for its dance with Iran.

Another shortcoming of literature on Iran's and Russia's cooperation is the biased interpretation of these relations. The partiality in the analysis of Iran's foreign policy in general and its relations with Russia in particular, is especially obvious in the works of American authors. Many of them are tending to represent Iran as a state whose main goal is the creation of nuclear weapons, a rogue state with radical Islamist ideology. The reason of this partiality is found in the contemporary international system. In fact, it is impossible to discuss Iranian-Russian relations without referring to the two countries' relations with the United States. Iranian-Russian relations are intermingled with Russia's relations with US from one side and Tehran's confrontation with Washington from the other, and the US factor is significantly affecting the relations of the two countries. As far as the US factor in Iranian-Russian relations is being widely discussed in the corresponding literature, in this paper I will not concentrate on it¹⁰.

Besides all these shortcomings, researches, made on Iranian-Russian relations, unfortunately are mainly detailed narration of the developments in two countries' relations. Although these researches are representing valuable information and detailed analysis of different spheres of two countries' relations, they lack theoretical analysis. Theoretical and complex analyses of this cooperation are very rare. John W. Parker's book *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran since the fall of the Shah* is one of these rare and unique works on Iranian-Russian relations where the author analyses ups and downs of Moscow-Tehran cooperation after the Islamic Revolution.

Furthermore, researches on Iranian-Russian relations are more concentrated on the systemic level factors which are influencing cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. The

¹⁰ For more on the US factor in Iranian-Russian relations see John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of Shah* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009).

main emphasis is on the international system, while the domestic factors are rarely taken into account. Moreover, Iran's domestic developments are less discussed, than those of Russia. If in case of Russia there are several extensive researches representing multi-layered and compound analysis of the influence which Russians' self-perception on domestic and international levels had on Moscow's foreign policy after the collapse of USSR, in case of Iran there is still much to be done. Domestic, factors influencing Russia's foreign policy (in particular the identity factor) have been widely discussed by IR scholars. Researches on Russia's perception of its role in the international system in the Cold War period are numerous and versatile,¹¹ while in case of Iran constructivist analyses the foreign policy of Islamic republic in the light of its self-perception are hardly ever found.

Moreover, the contemporary IR literature definitely lacks researches on the influence of the Iranian pre-revolutionary identity on its contemporary foreign policy. Researchers analyzing Iran's identity influence on its foreign policy are mainly emphasizing the Islamic essence of Islamic republic's identity. Other components present in Iran's national identity are not taken into consideration in the researches on Iran's alignment policies. Moreover, usually Iran is represented as an ideological, completely Islamic country, which constructs its foreign policy only on ideological basis. Iran is blamed in inability to understand contemporary international system and the dimensions of the systemic changes caused by the collapse of the USSR.¹² Shirin T. Hunter, while analyzing Iran's foreign policy, notes that Iran has not adjusted its foreign policy objectives and practices to the new international realities and, consequently, it has incurred substantial economic, political, and strategic losses.¹³ Moreover, she states, that this inability to overcome ideological boundaries and wrong interpretation of

¹¹ For more on this see Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian foreign policy: the return of great power politics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) or Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The foreign policy of Russia: changing systems, enduring interests* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009).

¹² For more on this see Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2010).

¹³ Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, xii.

the world system has led Iran to wrong foreign policy decisions, and enabled its neighbors to manipulate Iran's inability to reconcile its ideology-based foreign policy with systemic changes.¹⁴

In brief, contemporary IR literature lacks complex researches on the role of identity and perception of state role in Iranian-Russian relations. Moreover, as we will see in the next three chapters of this paper, in case of Iran and Russia such analysis must also contain reference to historical identities and roles of the two countries. In this thesis an attempt will be made to fulfill the abovementioned gap in the literature on Iranian-Russian relations.

¹⁴ Ibid., xii

Chapter 1 - Iran and Russia: The paradox of the “strategic partnership”

One the one hand discussion of contemporary Iranian-Russian relations has tremendous significance for understanding the developments in the Eurasian region, on the other, comprehensive analysis and interpretation of these developments in this region in general and Iranian-Russian relations, in particular, are impossible without understanding the context and rules of these relations. The aim of this paper is the discussion of the context and rules, which are conducting the relations between Tehran and Moscow. In this paper an attempt will be made to explain the existence of different contradictions in Iranian-Russian relations.

Before proceeding to the discussion of context and rules which are determining the course of Iranian-Russian relations, I will first start with the discussion of these relations, the abovementioned contradictions, present in different spheres of Moscow’s cooperation with Tehran, and the main topics, touched upon in the rhetoric of the two countries after the Cold War. The scope of this paper does not allow me to go into a detailed discussion of different spheres of Iranian-Russian relations, their mutual agreements, cooperation, and historical development of the latter. My main aim is to explore why these two countries, despite various and numerous disagreements in different spheres of their relations, at least on rhetorical level, are still describing their relations as “friendship” or “strategic partnership”.

Contemporary Iranian-Russian relations are contradictory and versatile. Accordingly, the rhetoric of the two countries’ on their relations and the other party is comprehensive and contradictory. These contradictions are visible in almost every important sphere of their relations. For example, on the one hand, Russia helps Iran construct nuclear power plant in Bushehr, on the other, it signs United Nations Security Council resolutions against Iranian nuclear program. In its turn, Iran, on the one hand is filing a lawsuit against the Russian Federation at the International Court of Arbitration because of Moscow’s refusal to provide

the Islamic Republic the S300 air defense systems, but on the other, it simultaneously qualifies its relations with the Russian Federation as ‘strategic partnership’, which guarantees regional stability. On the one hand, after the collapse of the Soviet Union Iran has been one of the largest importers of Russian arms, on the other, Iran is geographically in the immediate neighborhood of Russia and militarily strong Islamic Republic has the potential to pose serious threat to Russian security interests¹⁵. Moreover Russian Federation wants to be the principal player in its southern neighborhood¹⁶. Therefore the possible existence of strong and authoritative Islamic republic is not in Russia’s interests. Some strategic thinkers in Moscow are recognizing that in the long-term perspective Moscow can be faced with geopolitical competition with Iran in the Muslim territories of the former Russian and Soviet empire¹⁷. Even if we will assume that today Moscow does not believe that confrontation of Moscow with Islamic Republic is imminent or possible in the near future, the expression “strategic partnership” definitely does not represent the reality. The disagreements of Iran and Russia are numerous and deeply rooted in all spheres of the Iranian-Russian relations.

Although this paper is not concerned with the detailed analysis of different spheres and aspects of Russia’s and Iran’s relations, it is still necessary to give a general introduction of the two countries’ partnership and cooperation in general and the contradictions, present in this relations, in particular. This introduction will provide a point of departure for further analysis of the factors, which are defining the course of the two sides’ attitudes towards each other.

The spheres of Russia’s cooperation with Iran in Post-Cold War era are diverse. Moscow and Tehran are cooperating with each other in economic, military and political

¹⁵ Helen Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers: Russian Allignment with China, Iran, and Iraq in the Unipolar Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36.

¹⁶ Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, 106.

¹⁷ Ariel Cohen, “Russia’s Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama,” *Backgrounder* 2359, January 15, 2010, http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/2010/pdf/bg_2359.pdf (accessed May 29, 2012).

spheres. Besides, Iranian-Russian relations include not only direct Moscow-Tehran cooperation, but also direct partnership between regions and cities of two states: both countries have agreements of regional cooperation. Iran has political, cultural and trade ties directly with several Russian republics and oblasts, for example Tatarstan and Samara Oblast¹⁸.

During the past two centuries, Russia (Soviet Union) and Iran (Persia) have had uneasy, frequently turbulent, relations, often to the detriment of Iran¹⁹. Very frequently Iranian national security was threatened by Russia's expansionist policy under both tsars and commissars²⁰. Numerous Iranian political experts and politicians, even after the two decades of the Russian Federation's existence are still bearing in their mind and time to time emphasizing in their rhetoric, that Russia used to be the enemy of Iran and hence cannot be trusted. On the other hand, although after the collapse of the Soviet Union Iran and Russia have no shared geographical border and have different disagreements concerning the Caspian Sea region, Iranian nuclear program or Muslim population of Russia, both sides are describing their relations as partnership, which is providing regional stability. Inside the two states' political elites there is also a division between those who want to increase the level of partnership with the other party, and those who are opposing intimidation of relations between Moscow and Tehran. In case of Russia, the major actors influencing Russia's Iran policy obviously are divided into those seeking and those opposing cooperation between Russia and Iran²¹. This division affects all the spheres of Russian-Iranian cooperation. "Russian policy towards Iran often appeared inconsistent and incongruous with various ministries'

¹⁸ Sam Nunn and Adam N. Stulberg, "The Many Faces of Modern Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 2 (2000): 51.

¹⁹ Aadam Tarock, "Iran and Russia in "strategic alliance"," *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. ii (1997): 207.

²⁰ Tarock, "Iran and Russia," 207.

²¹ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 36.

fundamentally incompatible policies”²². Iran’s policy towards Russia is also based on conflicting attitudes and positions of Iranian politicians.

Iran’s relations with Soviet Union in Post-World War II period cannot be characterized as hostile. “To a degree the Soviets were content to have good relations with the Shah, as they did in the 1970s, with substantial economic cooperation, trade, and small sales of arms”²³. Iranian-Russian relations in the Soviet era were mainly economic. Later after the collapse of the USSR economic cooperation became the basis for increased cooperation in other fields²⁴. In the beginning of the 1990s the main initiative in the economic cooperation between the two countries was in Iran’s hands, Russia was just responding to these initiatives²⁵. This passiveness of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union is easily explainable: the Russian Federation in its early years had no clear political course and understanding of its own role at the international level. In the mid-1990s, after the period of identity crisis for Russia finished, Moscow’s relations with Iran started to become politicized and the economic cooperation, in its turn, started to get more attention from the Russian side.

In the very beginning of Russia’s relations with Iran in the Post-Soviet era economic aspects of these relations were first to be developed by the two sides. Economic cooperation between Moscow and Tehran has three main areas: arms sales, atomic energy and oil²⁶. In all these three key areas of economic cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic the abovementioned contradictions and disagreements are present. As far as it is beyond the scope of this paper this paper to go into the detailed discussion of all

²² Ibid., 37.

²³ Nikki R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski, edit. *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union and the United States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 7.

²⁴ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 98.

²⁵ Ibid., 99.

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

conflicting issues present in the Iranian-Russian relations, further I will briefly discuss several issues, which are central in the two sides' rhetoric.

In case of arms sales, the most resent disagreement between the two countries was the issue of Russia's refusal to implement Russian-Iranian contract for the supply of the S300 anti-aircraft missile systems to the Islamic Republic. In August 2011 Iran appealed to the International Court of Arbitration against Russia²⁷. This was the biggest conflict in Iranian-Russian relations after the collapse of the USSR. Iran's resentment became obvious, when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared, that Russia had sold itself to the US.

Another sphere of Russian-Iranian economic cooperation – atomic energy, also contains contradictions. Russia, despite of the US and NATO criticism, during the last two decades has been providing the Islamic Republic with nuclear technology. Even the sanctions, imposed by the US senate in 1998, against twenty Russian companies, connected with Iranian nuclear program, did not stop Russia to continue its cooperation with Iran in the field of atomic energy²⁸. On this occasion Russian Minister for Atomic Energy of the time Yevgeny Adamov stated, that Russia will continue its cooperation with Iran in the construction of nuclear power plants, in spite of 'huge' problems with the US around this issue²⁹. Since 1992, when the Russian-Iranian agreement on cooperation for peaceful use of nuclear energy and construction of nuclear power plant in Bushehr was signed, Russia has frequently been faced with the US criticism. In spite of this criticism during the last two decades Russia has continued to cooperate with Iran in the field of atomic energy, but this cooperation also contains controversies. On the one hand, Russia is protecting its nuclear agreement with Iran, stating that the deal broke no international laws, because Iran was a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty (NPT), and the inspections of International Atomic Energy Agency

²⁷ "Iran takes Russia to International Court of Arbitration over S-300," *Caspian Factor*, September 6, 2011, <http://www.casfactor.com/en/news/275.html> (accessed May 29, 2012).

²⁸ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

(AEA) found no problems³⁰. On the other Russia, after criticizing the sanctions against Iran, signed the UN Security Council's resolutions against Iran for six times. The signature of Russia under these resolutions, in its turn, is raising resentment of the Iranian side. Main complaints by Iran on this topic concern Russia's refusal to use its right of veto in the UN Security Council in protection of Iran. Besides, the Iranian side is strongly criticizing the delays in the completion of the Bushehr nuclear reactor.

Russian-Iranian disagreements, besides the abovementioned United Nations Security Council resolutions over the Iranian nuclear issue, termination of S300 agreement, Bushehr nuclear reactor's completion, are also present in the spheres of natural gas, oil, or the delimitation of the Caspian Sea³¹. In the light of these disagreements mutual statements of Tehran and Moscow, reassuring their mutual respect and trust towards each other, seem irrational. This irrationality is particularly obvious in the rhetoric of the Iranian side. On the one hand, Ahmadinejad slams Russia for selling out to 'Satan'³², on the other, two weeks after this statement of Ahmadinejad Iranian Deputy Minister and Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast stated: "We cannot allow other countries to interfere with our strategic partnership with Russia"³³.

The term 'strategic partnership' is the most frequently used by Iranian politicians and media for describing Tehran's relations with Moscow. Frequent use of this word combination by official Tehran is contradicting the existing atmosphere of distrust towards the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic. This distrust has historical roots. In the 19th century Russia twice declared war on Iran. For Persia these wars ended with two humiliating treaties.

³⁰ Ibid., 104.

³¹ Mark Katz and Maḥmūd Aḥmadī'nizhād, "Russian-Iranian relations in the Ahmadinejad era," *Middle East Journal* 62, no. ii (2008): 202-203.

³² The term 'Satan' refers to US. This statement was made by President Ahmadinejad on November 3th 2010 after Russia announced about the possibility of cancelling the deal on S300 ground-to-air missiles. For more on this see the link <http://rt.com/politics/ahmadinejad-russia-weapons-satan/>.

³³ This statement was made during an interview to the Russia Today. For more information see the link <http://rt.com/politics/iran-us-russia-mehmanparast/>

According to these treaties, Persia was forced to cede to tsarist Russia extensive territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia. During World War II part of Northern Iran was occupied by Soviet troops. The Soviet Union was also assisting communist secessionists in Iranian Azerbaijan from mid-1920s till mid-1950s. During the years of Iran-Iraq war Russia was assisting Saddam Hussein's administration by providing Iraq with Russian missiles³⁴.

At first glance after the collapse of the USSR for the first time in the past two centuries Iran could conduct its policy on Russia without being the object of potential threat from the latter's side, but the memory of historical enmity between Russia and Iran is still alive in Iran. The monitoring of Iranian media shows that even after two centuries Iranians are frequently mentioning the two Russian-Iranian wars of the 19th century. The bitterness provoked by the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828) treaties more than three decades after the Islamic Revolution is still present in Iran³⁵.

The level of distrust towards Russia and Moscow's negative image in the Islamic Republic became obvious during the 2009 demonstrations in Iran³⁶. Many demonstrators instead of usual slogan 'Death to America' were also using the slogan 'Death to Russia'³⁷.

The above discussion of different spheres of Iranian-Russian cooperation and the contradictions present in almost every sphere of it are conflicting with both sides' frequent claims about the existence of Iranian-Russian strategic partnership. The contradiction between the efforts of the two sides to describe their relations as long-range and perspective and their policy towards each other requires analysis and explanation. One possible explanation can be based on the realist's assumption that state rhetoric of state actors cannot be trusted. According to realist traditions in International Relations, there is a distinction between the

³⁴ Naji Qasra, "Iran Hopes to Have Strategic Partnership with Russia," *News Vdok*, <http://news.vdok.org/page.aspx?id=8473> (accessed May 29, 2012).

³⁵ John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of Shah* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), x.

³⁶ Demonstrators were challenging the results of presidential elections.

³⁷ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, x.

words of state actors and their material interests and practices³⁸. Realist's answer to the question "Why are Russia and Iran acting as having strategic relationship with each other?" in this context would probably be based on the balance of power theory and will sound like "Because they have common rival, i.e. United States". But even if we assume that balance of power theory can explain Russia's policy and choices, in dealing with Iran, the explanation of Iranian side's behavior still needs another basis. In the next chapter of my paper I will try to raise other factors, which can be the reason of the existence of the abovementioned contradictions in these bilateral relations, by discussing the structural and cultural identity and self-perception of the two states.

The explanation suggested by me in the next chapter will not only help us understand the developments in the Iranian-Russian relations, but also the situation in the Eurasian region. Moreover, further and more detailed research of these factors could make the foreign policy analysis of Russia and Iran in the Post-Cold War era more precise.

³⁸ Karin M. Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies: Critical Investigations in Security*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 6.

Chapter 2 - Self-Perception of Russian Federation: Acting as a Great

In this chapter of my thesis I will trace the link between the influence of Russia's self-perception and its relations with Iran. For accomplishing this task, I will first compare Russia's contemporary self-perception on international level, with the USSR's self-perception during the Cold War period. Further on the basis of this comparison between two identities I will proceed to the discussion of the role, which Russia prescribes to itself, while interacting, on one hand, with Iran and on the other, with US. In short, this chapter has purpose to show the identity context in which Russia conducts its relations with Islamic Republic.

2.1. Cold War: Game Between the Two Great Powers

Russia's perception of World order and its self-perception after the Cold War had certain characteristics tracing back to the Soviet era. Moreover the influence of these characteristics on the foreign policy of contemporary Moscow is tremendous. In fact, the majority of Moscow's foreign policy decisions in the 21st century is strongly influenced by these persistent characteristics. Hence, the discussion of Russia's contemporary identity and world view is impossible without the analysis of Soviet Union's self perception and the role, which it was playing on the international scene. The discussion of Soviet Union's identity during the Cold War will enable us to clearly comprehend the foreign policy decision making process of the Russian Federation. As far as USSR's identity after the World War II cannot be taken out of the Cold War context, I will start with the discussion of Russia's perception of the World order during the Cold War.

In brief, the perception of Post-Cold War World order by Russia is based on the denial of the world's unipolarity and US hegemony. During the past two decades numerous Russian academics and political actors repeatedly denied the hegemony of the US after the collapse of

the USSR³⁹. Moreover, Russians still believe that Russia must be the force opposing the one-sided solutions of the key problems of the world politics.⁴⁰ This self-identification and world view of the Russian Federation is deeply rooted in its tsarist and soviet past. The frames and the aims of this paper are not allowing me to go into the detailed analysis of the links between Russia's imperial past and its contemporary identity. Besides, this topic has been widely discussed in the corresponding literature during the past two decades. Hence I will briefly present the role, played by the USSR in the Cold War "game". Although this topic is widely studied, the discussion of the Soviet world view and self-perception will prepare ground for further analysis of the current political course and alignment policy of the Russian Federation. After discussing the role of the Soviet Union in the Cold War context, I will proceed to the discussion of the contemporary Russian identity.

To put it simply, during the Cold War years the identity of the Soviet Union was based on the principle of "good self" and "evil other" – in the eyes of the USSR Soviet Union was the good force, while the US and NATO were the evil, and vice versa, for NATO bloc Soviet one was the evil, the source of threat. Both sides were considering themselves responsible for fighting with the evil other. In this light the USSR, at least on rhetorical level, was identifying its role in the World as a role of "good hero". The formation of this self-identification and the understanding of Soviet Union's role on the international arena started right after the end of the World War II. On 9 February 1946 Stalin delivered a speech, which later will be interpreted as the beginning of the Cold War⁴¹. In this speech Stalin was blaming capitalist states for initiating the World War II. Stalin was also warning about the possibility of another global war in this speech because of the capitalism and capitalist states⁴². The force which

³⁹ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁴¹ Paul A. Chilton, *Security Metaphors: Cold War Discourse from Containment to Common House* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 134.

⁴² Chilton, *Security Metaphors*, 134.

was supposed to stop the global threat coming from the Western capitalist regime, according to Stalin, was the USSR. Later, this perception of the Soviet Union's significant role on the international scene became officially advocated by the Soviet Union. In short, the Soviet Union was the one who was supposed to resist the politics of the 'criminal' antagonist bloc. Both Eastern and Western blocs were describing the other party in their rhetoric as a dangerous 'criminal'⁴³. The understanding of world order and Soviet role in international politics by the USSR was based on this antagonistic attitude towards the Western bloc. The World was clearly divided between the two blocs, each of them was protecting its members from the other. The members of each bloc were considered to be united in families: both sides' rhetoric was describing their structure as family structure.⁴⁴ From 1950s till the end of 1980s these blocs not only had certain geographical borders, but also certain perception of each other's role on the international arena. This perception of self's and the other party's role in its turn had created distinct rules of interaction between two antagonist blocs during the Cold War period. These rules were more or less constant for almost 4 decades. To put it in another way, according to these rules the Soviet Union and NATO were both considering themselves to be right, while the other party was the liar and the source of threat. Both sides were contradicting their truth to the lies of the other, their liberty to the slavery of the other, their ideology to the ideology of the other bloc (democracy versus communism).⁴⁵ In other words, both sides had a distinct ideology, distinct inner structure, distinct world perception, distinct understanding of their role. In sum, during Soviet period, the role of the USSR in the world was distinct and defined.

⁴³ Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁵ Martin J. Medhurst, "Eisenhower and the Crusade for Freedom: The Rhetorical Origins of a Cold War Campaign," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1997):659.

2.2. Now, When the Cold War is Over

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the changes in the political structure of the world were radical. The collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, which had so long shaped Russia's self-perception and world view, left identity vacuum in many senses.⁴⁶ After being faced with drastic transformations on the world scene, Russia had to redefine its understanding of the world and newly formed Russian Federation's role in it. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, Russia found itself "between two different modern identities- that of the Soviet past and that of the western present".⁴⁷ This process of redefining the Russian identity was influencing Moscow's foreign policy. Till the mid-1990s the influence of the process of identity redefinition on Russia's foreign policy can be seen in Moscow's relations with Tehran. Before the mid-1990s Moscow was not showing any initiative in its relations with Tehran. The course of Moscow-Tehran relations before mid-90s was undetermined. Although in this period Iran was showing willingness to develop its cooperation with Russia, the Russia's attitude was uncertain.

During the process of redefinition of Russia's identity and role on international arena different forces inside Russia were completely rejecting and strongly criticizing Russia's Soviet past⁴⁸. Today, even two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is a division between those who want Russia to become West and those who advocate the creation of Russia's future on the basis of its Soviet Past. On the institutional level, the political identity and world view of Russia in many ways is very similar to the USSR's perception of Soviet identity and role on international scene during the past 15 years .

At the end of 1990s, after the period of identity vacuum inside Russia was over, Russia's interpretation of World order has been based on the principle of multipolarity. There

⁴⁶ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 7.

⁴⁷ Ted Hopf, *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 155-156.

⁴⁸ Hopf, *Social construction of international politics*, 159.

are no two antagonistic Soviet and NATO blocs anymore, but the unipolarity of the world is being rejected by numerous Russian politicians. Multipolarity of World order became a very common topic in Russian rhetoric from the mid 1990s. In the rhetoric of the Russian political elite, multipolarity is described as a means providing equality and stability in the world. The former Foreign Minister of Russian Federation Yevgeniy Primakov⁴⁹ was one of the main advocates of the World's multipolarity. Primakov was viewing the role of Russia in preventing a unipolar world dominated by a single superpower and supported the multipolarisation of the international system⁵⁰. Primakov was describing Russia's role as a counterweight to the negative trends that were appearing in international affairs because of American attempts to dominate the situation.⁵¹ Another example of Russian rhetoric on multipolarity of the world is the statement of Russian President Vladimir Putin on Munich Security Conference in 2007 where he stated that the unipolar world "that had been proposed after the Cold War did not take place."⁵²

After the collapse of the USSR, criticism and denial of unipolarity is a persistent theme in the Russian political discourse. Russia's efforts to portray the world as multipolar are a method of resisting to the US influence and also preserving Russia's self-identification as a Super Power.

The ideological basis of the Soviet Union has been replaced by the democracy now. The Russian political elite are trying to prove in their statements that today the Russian Federation is an equal member of the world community of democratic states who along with other members of the UN Security Council is responsible for maintaining international peace

⁴⁹ Primakov was foreign minister of Russia from January 1996 till September 1998

⁵⁰ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 26.

⁵¹ Ibid., 26.

⁵² Munich Security Conference Welcoming Page. Security Conference. <http://www.securityconference.de> (accessed May 30, 2012).

and security⁵³. Despite this ideological difference, the similarity between self-perception of the Soviet Union and Russia is obvious. If the Soviet Union was describing itself to be the one who was supposed to change the world with the help of its ideology because capitalism was the source of threat, and in order to keep the international peace global victory of socialism was necessary, today the Russian Federation considers itself to be the one responsible for the maintenance of peace and the 'right' World order.

The perceptions of the Russian Federation's role in the World and its relations with other states have many similarities with the Soviet ones too. The perceptions of Russia's own role on the international level are significant, because state behavior is affected by its perception of its own role. Roles are not just temporary conceptions with little impact on behavior⁵⁴. Roles played by states are compound phenomena, created by the combination of an actor's own understanding of what its behavior should be (role conceptions), society's demand (role expectations), and the particular context in which the role is being acted out.⁵⁵

In case of Russia, although after the collapse of Soviet Union the context of world politics has significantly changed, the interpretations of Russia's role by its citizens and politicians is strongly affected by Russia's imperialist past. Moscow's aspirations to be treated as one of the Great Powers of the world are very often contradicting the reality and Russia's contemporary circumstances⁵⁶. Russian Federation is no longer occupying the superpower position the Soviet Union had during the Cold War, but Russia's contemporary perceptions of its own role are very similar to the perceptions of the USSR's role by the Soviet Union. The legacy of czarist and especially Soviet power is still strongly affecting Russia's understanding of its role in the world.⁵⁷

⁵³ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁵ Glenn Chafetz, "The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 4 (1996): 663-664.

⁵⁶ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 22.

⁵⁷ Sherman Garnett, "Russia's Illusory Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 2 (1997): 61.

The most important characteristic of Russia's self perception in post Cold War era is the fact that Russia still perceives itself to be a great power⁵⁸. These perceptions of Russia's significant role in the world politics are prevailing between Russian political elites. In their turn, the perceptions of Russia's significant role in international developments are aspiring Moscow to create intimate relations with such states as Iran and China because strong international partnerships give Russia opportunity to demonstrate that it still has powerful friends. This aspiration of having alignments with powerful regional states is a means for Moscow to prove that like in Soviet times, Russia still has influence on the regional level. This influence on its turn gives Russia an opportunity to show greater authority in its relations with the USA and resist the American influence.⁵⁹ In other words, Russia's strong partnership with Iran is a method helping Moscow to continue playing the role of a superpower resisting the US and NATO, a role which was formulated in the context of the Cold War.

To put it differently, the perception of self as a superpower and the advocacy of multipolarity requires Russia's strong partnership with other Eurasian states, mainly with powerful ones, who are emphasizing in their rhetoric and proving by their actions either their anti-American orientation or their aspirations of having multipolarity in the world politics. Iran is particularly interesting for the Russian Federation because the strong anti-American orientation of the politics of the Islamic Republic is making Iran a reliable partner for Russia's success in playing the role of a great power in the multipolar world.

This attitude of Russia towards the Islamic Republic was formulated already during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin who saw Russian relations with Iran as part of Russia's broader relations with the USA⁶⁰. During the past two decades Moscow's alignment with Tehran is being used by Russia to actively challenge the United States.⁶¹ The nuclear sphere

⁵⁸ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 23.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁶¹ Ibid., 97.

of Iranian-Russian relations has been the most appropriate for this goal. In other words, Russian-Iranian cooperation in general and nuclear cooperation between the two states in particular is a means for Russia to demonstrate its independence from the US.

For Moscow the Iranian-Russian relations are not just interstate relations with another state or with an important regional actor. These relations for Moscow are not just versatile cooperation with one of Russia's neighboring countries; they are a part of Russia's larger game with the United States and NATO. Russia's attitude towards Iran cannot be discussed outside of the US-Russian relations. Only as a part of complete picture of Russian-US relations political decisions of Moscow on its relations with Iran can be analyzed, because only in this case the disagreement in the words or acts of Moscow towards Iran is explainable. This approach to the Russia's role perceptions and to its Post-Cold War game with US enables us to give rational explanation to such contradiction as the fact that on the one hand Russia helps Iran to resist US-led efforts to isolate Iran⁶², but on the other hand signs the UN Security Council's resolutions against Iran one after another.

By discussing the Iranian-Russian relations in the light of US-Russia relations, we can easily explain the contradictions present in Russia's attitude towards the Iranian nuclear program. In this light we can rationally explain such facts that despite Russia's direct involvement in the Iranian nuclear program in the frames of Russian-Iranian nuclear agreement, Russia can criticize Iranian nuclear program from time to time. For example, in July 2010 Russian former President Dmitry Medvedev said that Iran is moving closer to having the potential to create a nuclear weapon⁶³.

In sum, this chapter has shown that the contradictory behavior of Moscow in its relations with Iran is a side effect of Russia's perception of its own role on the international

⁶² Robert O. Freedman, "Russian-Iranian relations in the 1990s," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 4, no. ii (2000): Index Islamicus, *EBSCOhost* (accessed May 31, 2012).

⁶³ "Iran Nearing Nuclear Bombs" Russia Warns," *BBC News*, July 12, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10600100> (accessed May 29, 2012).

scene. In other words, Russia's contradictory behavior is the spillover effect of multiple use of Moscow's relationship with Iran by Russian political elite as a bargaining chip in the American-Russian relations during the latter's favorable periods. "Iran came to signify a means responding to Russian discontent with the evolution of the international system, and particularly American hegemony."⁶⁴

By putting Russia's relations with Iran in the context of its bigger game with Moscow I don't tend to minimize the importance of Russia's and Iran's mutual interests and benefits from their cooperation. The Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, no doubt, have common security and economic interests but very often we can see both sides making decisions which definitely are not leading to the strengthening and developing of their relations. In the previous chapter of this paper I discussed several disagreements between two states, which can be explained only after the discussion of the whole context. Russia's behavior and its foreign policy choices have been widely discussed and the statements concerning Russian self-perception and its attitude towards Iran, made by me above, are being widely discussed by different experts on Russia's foreign policy. And the statements concerning Russia's behavior towards Iran are presenting only one side of the coin, and in order to make general conclusions on Iranian-Russian relations, the discussion of Iran's behavior and self-perception, hence its foreign policy decisions is needed.

While discussing the historical process of Russian identity formation, Iver B. Neumann argues, that since the very beginning of Russian history Russia has tried to be equal to the European great powers. "Russia's quest for the status of great power within the confines of the state system has been an ongoing concern since the time of Peter"⁶⁵. The discussion of the Cold War context showed, that this aspirations of Russia were finally

⁶⁴ Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers*, 98.

⁶⁵ Iver B. Neumann, "Russia as a great power, 1815-2007," *Journal Of International Relations And Development* 11, no. 2 (n.d.): 128.

satisfied during the Cold War years, but the Collapse of Soviet Union, by changing the international system, created new challenges for Russian identity. Russia's choice to continue acting as a great power in the Post-Cold War decades was the result of its persistent historical ambitions. The comparison of Russia's role model with its contemporary self-perception, made in this chapter, showed that, despite of the systemic level changes in international politics, Russia's perception of its own role as a great power is more persistent than the bipolar world system. Moreover the findings of this chapter showed that Russia's alignment with Iran is another attempt, made by Moscow to prove its equality with the United States. Moreover frequent disagreements of Iran and Russia in the frames of Iranian nuclear program, the recent refusal of Moscow to provide Islamic Republic with the S300 surface-to-air missile systems, the Moscow's signature under six UN Security Council resolutions on Iran are proving, that for Moscow "strategic partnership" with Iran is rather an illusion, than reality. In sum, from the evidence provided in the previous two chapters we can see that Russian Federation needs to have good relations with Iran to get recognition of the US and NATO as great power. Russia's desire to get recognition of West as a "great power" puts its relations with Islamic Republic in a certain persistent framework.

Chapter 3 - Two Irans: Iranian and Islamic. Acting as Full Member of the International Society

This chapter is aimed to discuss the linkage between Iran's identity and its relations with Russia. As in the case of Russia's identity discussion, it starts with the general overview of Islamic Republic's identity and then proceeds with the discussion of this identities' influence on the Iran's foreign policy, in general, and its relations with Russia in particular. The chapter will present discussion of Iran's two – Islamic and Iranian identities. Due to the limited time and space, while discussing the influence of Islamic Republic's identity and role perception on its relations, I will mainly focus on the significance of the so-called Iranian identity layers. I believe that by paying close attention to the Iranian identity layer's influence on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy decisions we can gain better understanding of the paradoxical behaviour of Iran and Russia, while dealing with each other.

In case of the Islamic Republic, the discussion of identity and Iran's perception of its role in the international community is more complicated than it was in case Russia. Contemporary tendencies to name Iran an Islamic state and Iranian national identity an Islamic one are oversimplification and are not representing the reality. Another very common oversimplification is the representation of Iran's foreign policy as based only on the Islamic ideology. These interpretations are dismissing the fact, that Iranian national and state identity within the context of the Islamic Republic is multilayered. The discussion of these different layers can make significant contribution to the studies of Iran's foreign policy and alignments with other states. The role played by self-perception of states and their citizens in the foreign policy of states is being debated in different schools of International Relations' studies but in case of Iran, analyzing its foreign policy without referring to its self-identification, is not realistic, because of the ideological essence of Islamic Republic. The significance of self-perception in Iran's foreign policy making process is not simply high; it is frequently even

having negative effect on national interests of Iranians. Further in this chapter I will first discuss the different layers of Iranian identity and then will proceed to the discussion of their influence on the Iranian-Russian relations.

3.1. Pahlavi Strategy: Iranian Identity

The construction of Iranian identity after the Islamic Revolution has been widely discussed and contested. These disputes over the essence of Iranians' self-perception are justified, because of the Iranian society's multi-religious and multi-ethnic character⁶⁶. The identity uniting diverse ethnic and cultural groups, leaving within Iran's geographic borders, in one Iranian state has several layers. The self-perception of Iran on national and institutional levels is not just national or religious, it is a complex and multilayered self-perception.

"Iran's modern history is replete with attempts to consolidate a single Iranian national identity."⁶⁷ The process of the Iranian national identity formation during the Pahlavi era and after the Islamic Revolution has been strongly controlled by the state apparatus. Pahlavi administration was creating single Iranian identity, while the Islamic Republic's administration has been promoting single religious identity for more than three decades which is supranational and supraethnic.⁶⁸ Further I will briefly discuss the main characteristics of Iranian identity and self-perception in two distinct periods – Pahlavi era and after the revolution. The discussion of Iran's self-perception in the Islamic Republic without referring to the Pahlavi era is impossible because two identities (usually named Iranian and Islamic) are intermingled and cannot be divided from each other.

From the very beginning of the 20th century the Iranian intelligentsia and later Pahlavi state were promoting Iranian identity which was based on such primordialist ideas as the

⁶⁶ Shabnam J. Holliday, *Defining Iran: politics of resistance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2011), 127.

⁶⁷ Keith Crane, Rollie Lal, and Jeffrey Martini, *Iran's political, demographic, and economic vulnerabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2008), 37.

⁶⁸ Crane et al., *Iran's political*, 37.

notions of Aryan race and “superior character of the Iranian people, which has manifested itself throughout the history of the nation.”⁶⁹ After the end of the World War II until the Islamic Revolution Iranian political elites were highly emphasizing the uniqueness of Iran and the greatness of Iranian history. The Pahlavi dynasty was emphasizing the continuation of Iranian state tradition; the Achaemenid period was being named the political origin of the state⁷⁰. During this period Iranian historians and also Western orientalist were emphasizing the cultural continuity between medieval Islamic and ancient Iran. Pahlavi Iran was being portrayed as the cultural descendant of Achaemenid Iran. Achaemenid Iran, in its turn, was being portrayed as a geo-political concept, empire of the Aryans which was uniting all the Iranian nations. This link between Achaemenid and Pahlavi Iran was on the one hand helping to unite different Iranian ethnic groups in one identity, on the other hand it was emphasizing Iran’s ancient state traditions and the greatness of its cultural heritage. Even the change of the country’s official name from Persia to Iran in 1935 had two main goals. On the one hand, it was emphasizing the equality between Persians and other Iranian ethnicities. On the other hand, this renaming was emphasizing the Iranians’ Indo-European origin⁷¹. The ideas of Iran’s cultural uniqueness and its Aryan origin were secluding Iran from the Islamic world and emphasizing its cultural distinctiveness. The desire of the Iranian political elite under the Pahlavi dynasty to separate Iran from the Islamic world was the result of the strong Western political and cultural influence.

The period of Iranian identity formation under the Pahlavi shah was characterized first by strong British influence and then from 1946 up till the Islamic Revolution by significant American influence, and Iranians’ desire to be free from British and American political and economic influence. Strong ties of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi shah with the West were

⁶⁹ *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, s.v. “Iranian Identity in 19th-20th centuries,” <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iranian-identity-iv-19th-20th-centuries> (accessed May 29, 2012).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The name “Iran” derives from the word Arya – the endonym of ancient Indo-Iranian tribes.

considerably influencing the self-perception and identity of Iranians during the Cold War period. During this period Iranian political elites were leaving more by Western traditions than as an Islamic society. On the one hand, strong cultural influence of Europe and the US on Pahlavi Iran was influencing Iran's administration's worldview, by making it more European than Islamic. On the other hand, strong influence of Great Britain and later the US had become the reason of Iranians' strong desire to be free from and equal to the Western powers. From the beginning of the 20th century until the Islamic Revolution the formation of the so called Iranian identity was being strongly influenced by the desire of Iranian political and intellectual elites to protect Iran's (or Persia before 1935) autonomy vis-à-vis foreign powers⁷². This antipathy towards foreign powers was quite natural. Up to the Islamic Revolution Iran for almost two centuries was under the influence of different Western powers (Great Britain, France, Germany, in 20th century also the US) and in certain historical periods also by Russia. The results of this foreign presence in Iran were disastrous for Iran. The memories about historical injuries from Great Britain and the US are strongly influencing the self-perception of Iranians on national and institutional levels.

3.2. Post-Revolutionary Identity: Islamic and Iranian Layers

In the post-revolutionary Iran Khomeini was building the fundament of the Islamic Republic on the basis of antinationalism and pan Islamism. During the post revolutionary years Shia Islam was considered to be important glue which held Iranian national identity together. During the three post revolutionary three decades, the definition of being Iranian has been heavily based on a common faith (Shi'ism).⁷³

⁷² *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, s.v. "Iranian Identity in 19th-20th centuries." <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iranian-identity-iv-19th-20th-centuries> (accessed May 29, 2012).

⁷³ Crane et al., *Iran's political*, 41.

In spite of this official pan-Islamist ideology of the Islamic Republic, already during the years of Iran-Iraq war and later because of the recent disagreements with the international community over Iran's nuclear program, Islamic Republic's government simultaneously with the Islamic ideology started to foster a common Iranian identity based on nationalism.⁷⁴ During the past two decades, despite the official Islamist ideology of state apparatus, the revival of pre-Islamic influences can be seen in Iran. The commonly accepted interpretation of this return is based on the idea of Iranian identity's strong roots in the Islamic Republic of Iran and government's inability to exterminate these ideas because "during the last 14 centuries the two histories of Islam and Iran have become so intermingled that it is impossible to search for Iranian identity without Islam or for Islamic identity without a strong Iranian presence in it."⁷⁵ There is no doubt that in the post-revolutionary years, despite Islamic government's systemic policy of Iran's cultural and political Islamization, "pre-Islamic aspects of Iranian culture and identity have not disappeared."⁷⁶

Mehdi Bazargan, first prime minister of the Islamic Republic, stated about the intermingled character of Iranian identity in the transitional period between the fall of shah and creation of Islamic republic: "To oppose Islam to Iranian nationalism is tantamount to destroying ourselves. To deny Iranian identity and consider nationalism irreligious is part and parcel of the anti-Iranian movement and is the work of the anti-revolutionaries."⁷⁷

For the majority of researchers the return to Iranian ideology was based on the Iranian administration's desire to prevent possible challenges posed by non-Persian ethnic groups⁷⁸ and unite the diverse ethnic and cultural Iranian groups around one ideology. My proposition

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁵ *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, s.v. "Iranian Identity in 19th-20th centuries." <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iranian-identity-iv-19th-20th-centuries> (accessed May 29, 2012).

⁷⁶ Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, 18.

⁷⁷ Bāzargān, Mehdi. "Nahzat-e žedd-e irāni," *Keyhān*, 23 Šahrivar 1359/14 September 1980. In Dr. Maḥmud Afšār, "Waḥdat-e melli wa tamā-miyat-e arži," *Ayanda* 6/9-12, 1980.

⁷⁸ During the 20th century the Azeri and Kurdish populations of Iran have frequently demanded more cultural freedom from central government. For more on this see Crane, Lal and Martini

is that, besides the deep roots of Iranian identity within the Islamic Republic and state efforts to prevent separatist movements, there was another reason for the return to the Iranian ideology. Second reason of return to the nationalist and primordialist ideas was the desire of the state leadership to show to the World that Iran is not an aggressive underdeveloped Islamist country. By promoting ancient Iranian culture Iran is showing high level of its cultural development and uniqueness in the region. By showing to the West that Iran is a civilized country with almost 25 centuries of state traditions, Iranians are proving their equality with the other party in negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. In this way Iran tries to prove that it is not just a dangerous and uncivilized country with a radical government but a full and ancient member of the international community.

The formation of the contemporary Iranian identity during the past two centuries was under the influence of several main factors. First factor is Iran's long traditions of statehood and ancient history of Iran, and the second factor is the long-term strong western domination in Iran before the Islamic Revolution.

Another factor is that Iran is distinct from its neighboring Islamic countries in many aspects and the state ideology and self-identification of Iran as an integral part of the Islamic world is not representing the reality. Shi'a Iran, in spite of its current ideology, is never considered to be a full member of dominantly Sunni Islamic world. On the other hand, Western cultural influence during the first three quarters of the 20th century and Pahlavi pan Iranian ideology was too deeply rooted in Iran to be easily removed by the Islamist ideology. The anti-imperialist and anti-American ideology of the Islamic Republic is based on this desire of Iran to be free from Western influence and to be considered politically and culturally equal to the West.

In sum, contemporary Iran's self-perception is based on two different ideological foundations – Iranism and Islamism; both intermingled and inseparable. Iranian self-

identification, based on the amalgamation of two distinct ideologies, is often contradicting. On the one hand, Islamic Republic's official self-perception is Islam, on the other hand, Iran under Pahlavis and Islamic Republic after the Iran-Iraq war has tended to be equal to the West.

Iran's perception of contemporary international system and Islamic Republic's role in this society has been widely debated. The official position of the Islamic Republic is based on the Khomeini ideology according to which Iran is supposed to create perfect Islamic society to combat Islam's enemies⁷⁹ and defend Islamic and non-Islamic weak states and peoples from injustices and injuries⁸⁰. During the past three decades this ideology had been proved to be not realistic. As I already mentioned, Shi'a Iran has never been fully integrated in the society of Islamic states, the majority of which is sunny. On the other hand, this ideological framework often contradicts Iran's national interests.

Islamic ideology during the Iran-Iraq war and after the 9/11 is not helping Iran to gain the trust of great powers in the frames of Iranian nuclear program. "Islamic extremism is viewed as a rival and threat by major powers."⁸¹ It is not accidental, that the Islamic administration officially returned to the elements of Iranian identity after the Iran-Iraqi war. The promotion of Iranian values became especially obvious after the emergence of disagreements with the UN Security Council over Iranian nuclear program. Iranian identity, the emphasis on the ancient cultural heritage and Indo-European origin of Iranian peoples is representing Iran as a civilized country, but only self-perception and self-representation as a civilized country is not enough to be gain the trust of the international community. This self-perception and self-representation strongly affects Iran's domestic and foreign policy, frequently this influence has negative and contradicting effect.

⁷⁹ According to this ideology the main enemy of Islam is United States.

⁸⁰ Hunter, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, 29.

⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

Official interpretation of contemporary international political system by Iran is very similar to the Russian one in the Post-Cold War period. The main emphasis of Iran's world view is on the multipolarity of the world. The role, officially prescribed by Iran to itself, is based on the Khomeini ideology. According to the Islamic state concept of Khomeini, Iran in the multipolar world is the resistance to the great powers' 'evil' politics and world domination by 'Satan', i.e. the USA. In this light, the majority of researchers are blaming Iran in being not realistic in its interpretation of the contemporary international system. Iran is blamed for misinterpreting the construction of international world system, in ideological approach to its relations with other states, in lack of pragmatism and realism. Moreover, Iran is blamed in complete lack of understanding of the international context.⁸² These accusations in non-pragmatist and ideological approach of the Iranian administration to its foreign policy are usually dismissing several facts. Perhaps, the most important of them is the Khatami⁸³ administration's efforts to normalize Iran's relations with the US.⁸⁴ Although Khatami's efforts did not bring Iran and the US to the negotiation table, they showed that Iran's foreign and hence alignment policy is far more complicated, than it is traditionally accepted to be. Besides, the interpretation of Iranian foreign policy as ideological and based exclusively on Khomeini's politicized version of Islam, does not explain the contradictions present in Iranian-Russian relations. Any analysis of Iranian-Russian relations should also take into consideration the influence of Iran's perception of its own place in the international system.

⁸² Shahram Chubin, "Iran's strategic predicament," *Middle East Journal* 54, no. i (2000): 11-12.

⁸³ Fifth President of Islamic republic Mohammad Khatami was in office from 2 August 1997 till 3 August 2003

⁸⁴ For more on this see R.K. Ramazani, *Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy* in *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58/4, 2004

3.3. “Strategic Partnership”: Iranian Perspective

In the second chapter of this thesis was discussed the Russian motivation for playing the “strategic partnership”. The majority of researchers, while analyzing Iranian-Russian relations, are stating, that despite contradictions and disagreements present in this partnership, both countries need each other’s political support in the bigger game with the United States. In case of Russia, this statement is not completely correct. Russia definitely needs Iran in its bigger game with US, but as the two previous chapters of this thesis showed very frequently Russia is using its relations with Iran as a trump card in the game with the US. On its turn, frequent critical statements of Iranian politicians gives basis to argue, that this fact is not hidden for the Iranian side. While monitoring Iranian media, I noticed that Iranian political elites and political analysts are frequently blaming Russia in playing two-sided game with Iran. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic’s experience of cooperating with Russia in the Post-Soviet period has proved that Russia is not a reliable partner for Tehran in its bigger game with the US. The frequent complains of Islamic Republic concerning Russia’s delays in the construction of Bushehr nuclear power plant and Tehran’s recent court action concerning the agreement on S300 surface-to-air missile systems, on their turn, have proved that Iran’s leadership clearly realizes the unreliability of Russia as a strategic partner in the struggle with the US. Only two years ago the Islamic Republic’s president internationally declared that Russia “sold” Iran to the US.⁸⁵ These anti-Russian declarations resulting from repeated disappointments in Russia’s Iranian policy are proving, that Iran, without any doubt, realizes that in case of US-Iranian conflict Moscow will not jeopardize its relations with the US for the sake of Tehran. In this light Iran's efforts to present its relations with Russian Federation

⁸⁵ “Ahmadinejad Condemns Russia over Canceled Missile Deal,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 3, 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Ahmadinejad_Condemns_Russia_Over_Canceled_Missile_Deal/2209691.html (accessed May 29, 2012).

as “strategic partnership” gives cause for reflection, because if the Russian framework (acting as a great power) has been comprehensively studied in the Post-Cold War IR literature, the same cannot be said about Iran.

The majority of researchers, while analyzing Iranian-Russian relations, are focusing on the politics of the Russian Federation. “Russo-Iranian relations should be analyzed in the light of Russia’s changing foreign policy priorities and Iran’s place within them.”⁸⁶ This ‘Russo-centric’ approach to the Iranian-Russian relations portrays Russia as the one who is deciding the course of cooperation with the Islamic Republic. The latter is presented more as a toy which has no power to initiate any change in its relations with Russia. My assumption is that ‘Russo-centric’ approach to the relations between Tehran and Moscow is not self-consistent. It does not explain the motivations of Iran for continuing its “strategic partnership” with Russia. It is generally accepted, that Iran’s efforts for acting as having “strategic partnership” with Russia are the result of the Islamic Republic’s policy towards the United States. In other words, Iran’s only motivation of keeping good relations with Russia is considered to be the common concern of two countries over the American and NATO domination in the region.⁸⁷ As I already mentioned, this interpretation of Iran’s foreign policy is an oversimplification. Discussion of Iran’s foreign policy and its alignment with other states requires complex analysis of both countries’ self-identification and the influence of Russian and Iranian identity in their bilateral relations.

By making this statement I don’t tend to minimize the importance of Russia’s and Islamic Republic’s common political and economic interests or their mutual need to resist US hegemony in the Eurasian region. My proposition is that while analyzing Russian-Iranian relations, such factors as the self-perception of Iran as culturally equal to the West autonomous state must be taken into account. In case of Russia, its self-perception as great

⁸⁶ Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy*, 105.

⁸⁷ Hunter, *Iran’s Foreign Policy*, 106.

power after the collapse of the Soviet Union have been widely discussed in international relations' studies, while the role of Iranian identity in the foreign policy making process of Islamic Republic has been widely ignored.

The discussion of identity of the Islamic Republic made above showed that Iran's contemporary self-identification is not based only on the Islamic ideological framework, created by Ayatollah Khomeini. Moreover, the presence of Iranian nationalist layers in the contemporary Iranian identity shows that despite the Islamic Revolution and officially accepted Islamic ideology of the country, the identity framework created in the Pahlavi era is still strongly influencing Iran's self-perception and self-representation. Moreover, in spite of its Islamic ideology, already during Iran-Iraq war Iran restarted to represent itself as civilized ancient country with long state traditions and ancient culture. These tendencies were particularly strong during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami and are still influencing Iran's self-perception in the Ahmadinejad era. Islamic Republic's foreign policy is being strongly influenced by the intermingled Iranian-Islamic self-perception of Iran. The self-perception of Iran as an ancient member of the international community who deserves being respected as plenipotentiary member of international society is affecting its alignment policy.

Concerning Iran's relations with the Russian Federation, my proposition is that Iran is acting like a strategic partner of Russia because it needs partners who will help the Islamic Republic to reshape its image on the international arena. Iran needs space for exporting its Iranian identity. It needs auditory for reconstructing its status on the international arena. The representation of Islamic Republic's alignment with Russia as "strategic partnership" helps Iran to represent itself as a state which can have strategic relationship with a powerful Christian country on equal terms. My answer to the question "Why Iran very often closes its eyes on the violation of its interests by Russia and continues to name its relations with Moscow *strategic partnership*?" is "Russia helps to reshape Iran's image on the international

level. Besides, anti-American context of two countries' relations Moscow-Tehran '*strategic partnership*' helps Iran to validate its self-perception as an ancient and civilized state on the international level." Even if Russia is not a reliable partner for Iran in the face of US, Russia's declarations on peaceful intentions of Tehran in the frames of Iranian nuclear program helps Iran to gain more respect on international level.

In other words, for Iran is putting tremendous efforts in its relations with Russian Federation, because of its need in a state, who can help Iran to assert its self-identification as an equal member of international state system on international level. Although this argument requires further investigation and multilayered analysis of Iran's foreign and identity policy, during the last three decades, I believe that the Iranian identity factor cannot be excluded from the researches on Iranian-Russian relations. Moreover, I believe that identity approach to the Iranian foreign policy, in general, could shed light on many contradicting issues, present in Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

Conclusion

Main purpose of the thesis was to suggest an explanation for the paradox of “strategic partnership” between Iran and Russia, to analyze the factors that determine the contradictory behavior of Moscow and Tehran towards each other. In order to accomplish this task it was necessary to focus on the self-perception of two countries. Moreover, it was necessary to focus on the different layers of two countries’ identities and role-perceptions in two different periods of both countries’ history. It should be noted that the paper did not aim to conduct an all-embracing study of Iranian-Russian cooperation during the past three decades; neither was it meant to give an overview of the self-perception of these states in the Post-Cold War era. The main focus of the thesis was on the factor of importance of Iran’s and Russia’s self-perception in their cooperation.

Aimed to contribute to a better understanding of such contradictions present in the Iranian-Russian relations, the thesis set off from the discussion of Iran’s and Russia’s contradictory behavior towards each other. Due to the constraint in time and space, the discussion of different aspects of the Iranian-Russian relations is limited. The discussion of Tehran’s and Moscow’s disagreements in different areas of their cooperation showed that the two states have significant economic and political disagreements with each other. A conclusion followed was that the expression “strategic partnership” cannot be applied to the relations between these two countries. In this light the frequent use of this expression by the two sides (in particular Iranian side) in their official statements was paradoxical. In other words, general discussion of Iranian-Russian relations, presented in the first chapter of this thesis, showed that the efforts of the two countries (particularly Islamic Republic) to represent their relations as strong strategic partnership are paradoxical. For comprehension of the reasons, determining Iran’s and Russia’s paradoxical behavior in the frames of their bilateral

relations, in the second and third chapters of my thesis I suggested to take into consideration two countries' perception of the role played by each of them in the World.

The main aim of this paper's second chapter was to represent Russian Federation's self-perception and role it prescribes to itself in the international system. For accomplishing this task, it was necessary to discuss the similarities, between the role prescribed by Russian Federation's to itself and the role of USSR played by it during the Cold War. This comparison between the two contexts showed that contemporary Russia, despite the systemic level changes, which took place in the international politics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, still acts like a Great Power. Moreover, the comparison of two Cold War and contemporary contexts of Russian identity showed that Russian Federation still builds its relationship with US according to the rules developed during the Cold War period. These rules are strongly affecting Moscow's alignments with other states. The main argument, made in the second chapter of my paper is that Russian Federation is conducting its relations with Islamic Republic as a part of its larger game with the United States.

In the final chapter, I discussed these relations from the Iranian perspective. I presented and analyzed the main motivation of Islamic Republic for playing the "strategic partnership" game with Russia. For this purpose Islamic Republic's two identities – Islamic and Iranian – were taken into consideration. The discussion of these different and even contradictory layers of Iran's identity showed that despite the fact that Islamic ideology impacts Iran's political system as a whole, the Iranian identity elements are still influential in country's self-perception on international level. The main argument of the final chapter was that Iran plays "strategic partnership" game with Russian Federation, as it not only needs partners for resisting US hegemony, but also, because it needs a platform for exporting its historical, the so-called Iranian identity. In sum, in the final chapter I demonstrated that Islamic Republic identifies itself as a country with highly developed ancient civilization, but

as far as Iran's self-perception is conflicting with its reputation on international level, Iran, in order to reconcile its self-perception with what international society thinks about it, needs other states – states that will represent Iran not only in the light of its Islamic, but rather Iranian identity. Russia is the most suitable candidate for the role of a state, which can present Islamic Republic's Iranian identity in the World, or, at least, in the UN Security Council.

In sum, the thesis concludes that although the majority of researchers tend to consider the existence of the paradox of “strategic partnership” in Iranian-Russian relations as a result of the mutual desire of Moscow and Tehran to resist US hegemony, the case of Iran shows that while analyzing its relations with Russia, other factors must be taken into consideration too. Further more detailed research on the role, played by Iranian identity layers, in the foreign policy of Iran could make a significant contribution to the studies of Iranian-Russian relations. Moreover, extensive research on the multilayered national identity of Iran could explain numerous controversies, present in Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

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