



## Iran's Strategic Shift to China and Russia

**OE Watch Commentary:** While many in the United States perceive Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution as fundamentally anti-American in character, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ideology was equally antagonistic toward the Soviet Union. "Neither East nor West but Islamic Republic," became a popular slogan as Iranian crowds thumbed their noses at both the Soviet Union and the United States.

With the end of the Cold War, however, and a heightened US presence in the region—especially after the 1991 Operation Desert Storm and the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom—the Iranian leadership has increasingly sought greater strategic alignment with Russia (see: "Iran-Russia Relations," *OE Watch*, July 2016) and, in recent months, has questioned whether it is time to revise the Khomeini-era slogan (see: "Will Iran Pivot to the East?" *OE Watch*, September 2018).

The 28 January 2019 remarks by Major General Yahya Rahim-Safavi, a former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and today Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's top military advisor, appears to put any debate to rest. In a speech excerpted here from coverage in the semi-official *Iranian Students' News Agency*, he identifies the United States and Israel as the chief enemies of the Islamic Republic and suggests that Iran must respond by aligning itself more closely with Russia and China, which he identifies as the United States' top competitors.

While the Iranian public remains suspicious of Russia given Russia's own imperial history in the region, Rahim-Safavi's remarks appear to mark the end of any debate about a shift into Russia's orbit. Rahim-Safavi speaks not as an individual, but as a member of the Supreme Leader's inner circle. As for China, Iran's outreach is likely motivated as much by the economy as geostrategy. Iran remains a rentier state heavily dependent on oil sales, and China is thirsty for energy supplies. Whether China is willing to put all its eggs in the Iranian basket as Rahim-Safavi hopes, though, is unclear as Beijing's traditional approach is to maintain cordial relations with all energy suppliers, including Iran's rival Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, so long as Tehran feels itself backed by major powers, it is unlikely to make concession or fear retaliation in case it engages militarily in the region. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**



Yahya Rahim-Safavi, advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei and former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Source: ISNA, <https://cdn.isna.ir/d/2018/03/15/3/57654376.jpg>.

*“The model of the Iran is to support the resistance axis, and the strategic development of strategic relations with America’s global rivals like Russia and China, and these can be considered as the main strategies of the defense architecture of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”*

**Source:** “Dar Aghaz Penjmin Daheh Enghalab, Yek Janh Tarkibi ‘Aleyeh-e Rahandazi Shodeh Ast (At the beginning of the fifth decade of the revolution, there is a hybrid war against Iran),” *Iranian Students' News Agency*, 28 January 2019. <https://www.isna.ir/news/97110804066>

*The secretary of the first national conference on the defense architecture of the Islamic Republic of Iran, presented strategic proposals for the security architecture of the Islamic system, and said, “Promotion of dignity and geopolitical and geostrategic weight and the great cultural power of the Islamic Republic of Iran is how to defeat the U.S. strategy in the region, including its Greater Middle East Plan, toppling the Syrian government. The model of the Iran is to support the resistance axis, and the strategic development of strategic relations with America’s global rivals like Russia and China, and these can be considered as the main strategies of the defense architecture of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*